

The Awful Stabbing Simulator In Your Children's Bedroom

Are The Undead Taking Over Our Streets!?



You Won't Believe How Disgusted We Are About This Thing That's Not Really That Big A Deal, But We'll Pretend It Is







As games have become more realistic over the decades, so censorship bodies around the world have started laying down restrictions on what they can depict. As a result games have been banned around the globe and we wanted to celebrate these transgressors of the common good.

Every game in this collection has been banned somewhere for some reason whether for violent content, sex, nudity or energy drink advertisements, and we've added that very information to our original reviews for you here. There's also behind the scenes features, discussions of violence and an interview with Jack Thompson, so enjoy.





- 04 Manhunt
- 06 God Of War
- 10 Behind The Scenes of God Of War
- 18 Football Manager 2005
- 20 Counter-Strike
- 21 Postal 2
- 22 Behind The Scenes of Postal
- 26 Condemned: Criminal Origins
- 28 The Punisher
- 30 Canis Canem Edit
- 32 Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2
- 34 Super Columbine Massacre
- 38 God Of War II
- 42 Manhunt 2
- 44 Ultra Violence
- 50 Mass Effect
- 54 Condemned 2: Bloodshot
- **58** Grand Theft Auto IV
- 64 You Don't Know Jack
- 70 Fallout 3
- 72 Dead Rising 2
- 74 **EA Sports MMA**
- 76 Homefront
- The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings **78**
- 82 Dark Souls
- 86 What's So Bad About Violence?
- 92 Spec Ops: The Line
- Medal Of Honor: Warfighter 94
- 96 Call Of Duty: Black Ops II
- Saints Row IV 100
- 104 Grand Theft Auto V
- Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number 108

#### REVIEW | MANHUNT | PLAYSTATION2







#### FORMAT REVIEWED PlayStation2

ORIGIN

#### PUBLISHER

Rockstar Games DEVELOPER

Rockstar North

PRICE £39 99

#### RELEASE

21 November 2003

PLAYERS

Mission objectives are usually in wide-open spaces, making them more dangerous to approach...

## **MANHUNT**

#### VIOLENCE BEGETS VIOLENCE, AND NON-EXISTENT GAMEPLAY TOO

n a market where giving people what they want is the sure-fire route to success, it was inevitable that something like Manhunt was going to appear. Playing on the premise that

violence sells. Manhunt revels in bloody decadence and has the balls to confront a taboo subject like snuff movies with such bluntness you may wonder how it ever got off the drawing board. Not that we've got a problem with this, of course - we've often succumbed to the base instinct of beating virtual characters to death for the sake of entertainment. But as you might have worked out from our score, we do have a sizeable bone to pick with Rockstar's latest 'mature' game. It's less about this mature side of things and more to do with the gameplay, or lack thereof... but we'll come to that shortly.

Aesthetically at least, Manhunt gets off to a good start by backing up its gruesome premise with plenty of edgy, atmospheric style. Portrayed entirely in 8mm-esque graininess (which helps cover up the slightly sub-par texturing in places), the story of James Earl Cash - convict-turnedplaything for twisted snuff director Starkweather and his ultra-violent encounters with Carcer City's malevolent Hunters is one that has Rockstar North's prints all over it. This is a good thing, as the developer is more than capable of spinning a good yarn through a combination of interesting locales, suitable background music and quality voice acting - indeed, it's the vocal talent of actors like Brian Cox (the original Hannibal Lecter) that really gives the game that atmospheric edge it needs to get away with such brutal content.

#### **FAQs**

#### Q. VIOLENT, IS IT?

Stupid question - of course it's violent. Unfortunately, the gamenlay hinges completely on this violence and, as such, gets rather tiresome after only a few levels.

#### Q. BUT THERE'S MORE, RIGHT?

Er, no, there isn't. No matter how it's worded. practically every mission is 'Kill everyone in the area and move on' - no more, no less

#### Q. ATMOSPHERIC?

Certainly, although not to the extent that it's ever overly scary. Compared to games like Proiect Zero, it's not in the same league.







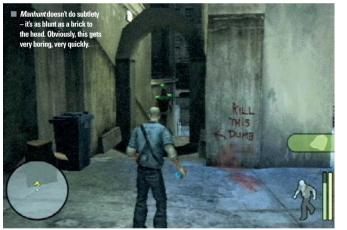


#### **BULLY BONUS**

Complete a scene in Manhunt and your performance will be graded out of five stars how many you get depends on how long you took, the difficulty level you're on (either Fetish or Hardcore) and how stylish you were. Increasing your style points naturally requires you to perform more 'impressive' executions throughout the scene; melee weapons require you to hold down the button for longer while behind a Hunter, while firearms need to be used at close range. If you can survive each scene with a high enough grade, you'll unlock various bonus materials, such as genuinely interesting original concept art and designs, or a handful of pretty flaccid bonus missions that add nothing to the rest of the game.

While good looks are all very well, though, they're obviously not enough to make a good game on their own. Unfortunately, Manhunt makes them work damn hard, simply because they're the only thing to compensate for the gaping holes in the gameplay (or at least, what gameplay there is). What we have here are the absolute bare bones of the stealth genre mixed with shock video scenes that attempt to add flavour to the otherwise bland action. Essentially the gameplay works as follows: track down a Hunter, get behind him, hold down the X-button... and, short of getting to watch a cut-scene featuring all kinds of gratifying death, that's it.

Things get slightly more complicated if you get spotted, as Cash's inability to hold his own in a fistfight means that the only real option is to run. Even so, escape is simply a matter of running into a designated 'shadowy' spot then waiting until the Hunters decide to stop looking for you. That won't take long either, as most of the time they'll stand right in front of you while shouting all manner of abuse, then give up and obligingly turn around so you can bump them off with the minimum of fuss. Combine this with the fact that virtually every mission in the game, no matter how it's worded, comes down to having to kill every Hunter in an area before you can move on, and it doesn't take long for things to get boring. Control-wise, it's also a fairly mixed bag. Cash's sneaking abilities are manageable but the hand-to-hand combat is poor at best - arguing that you're only supposed to use it as a last resort (this being a stealth game and all) isn't a valid excuse.



Falling foul of the 'style over content' trap that the GTA series has so far managed to avoid, Manhunt is a disappointment. Initially looking as though it could have plenty of promise, actually playing it for any length of time just reveals it to be unimpressive and dull. With things only really getting interesting about two-thirds through the game and everything before that being shallower than a puddle, we can't help but think that only gamers with the strongest of wills - or those simple enough to think that violence is 'cool' - will have the patience to plough through the tedium to find the relatively alright bits near the end. And yes, we said alright; not great or even good, just alright. No doubt the bloodthirsty masses will go crazy over this title (as has already been proved by the number of high-scoring reader reviews posted on the internet), but we like our violence a little more satisfying.





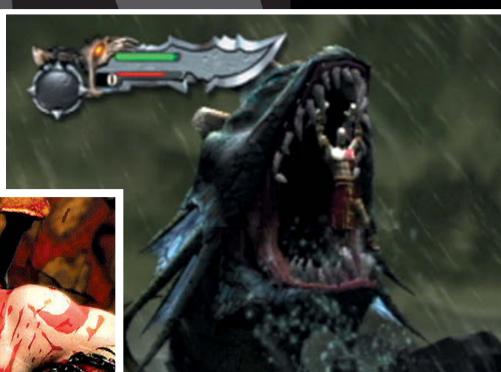




#### REVIEW | GOD OF WAR | PLAYSTATION2



 $\hfill \blacksquare$  The game's scale is breathtaking; Kratos will have to get up that mountain.

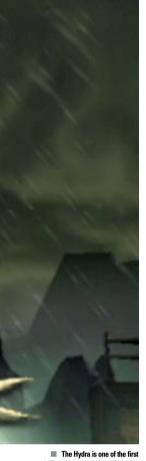


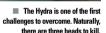






CLASH OF THE TITANS



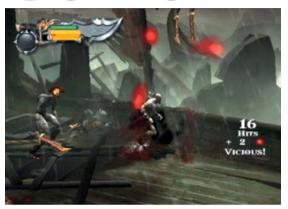






THE SHARPEST BLADE IN SONY'S GAMING ARSENAL

## **GOD OF WAR**





hat with the development of the PS3 and the launch of the PSP, Sony hasn't found the time to release many quality first-party PS2 games lately. During the last

decade, titles such as Ico have shown us that the founding fathers of PlayStation are quite capable of producing the goods, but the company's recent concentration on EyeToy- and microphone-led products has caused some to worry that it was neglecting its duty to bring out the best in its elderly console. Well, worry no more, because God Of War is not only one of Sony's best in-house games in months, it's also one of the most accomplished PS2 titles yet to see the light of day. It's unbelievable that until recently God Of War had no scheduled release on these fair shores. With pitiful efforts like The Getaway: Black Monday ruining our working day during the last year, the reality of such a triumphant, assured action game being kept solely for American gamers is almost criminal. That such a sleeper title could have escaped the attention of the world until now, when so much detritus gets a heavily marketed release, is beyond our comprehension.

Taking its cues (liberally) from the legends of ancient Greece, God Of War is a title that has never lost sight of what it hopes to achieve. Even ignoring the mile-tall enemies and viciously straightforward puzzles contained within, it still

stands as a proud monument to the possibilities of imaginative game design and thorough planning. However, as well as looking to innovate, Sony's title also captures the uncomplicated feel of oldschool platform bashers, knowing exactly when a gamer would rather think in four directions than dozens, where simplicity is far more suitable than contrived, incongruous degrees of choice. If Capcom found the juiciest vein of unadulterated gaming with Resident Evil 4, then surely God Of War hacks at that vein and drinks it dry. And this from the studio that brought you Twisted Metal:

For the soundbite-friendly, God Of War is Prince Of Persia-meets-Devil May Cry at a mythology lecture, though neither of these gaming influences come close to matching the scale of SCEA's brutal romp, let alone the level of violence. Once a servant of Ares, God of War, warrior Kratos is tricked into murdering his own wife and child, and with the aid of the remaining gods vows to take revenge by killing his former master. So begins a quest that takes in such tourist hot spots as ancient Athens, The Desert of Lost Souls, Pandora's Castle V



"FOR THE SOUNDBITE-FRIENDLY. **GOD OF WAR IS PRINCE OF PERSIA-MEETS-DEVIL MAY CRY AT A MYTHOLOGY LECTURE"** 

How do you defeat an enemy who proudly stands a mile in height?

#### REVIEW | GOD OF WAR | PLAYSTATION2



#### "A MASTERFUL GAME THAT GETS THE VERY MOST FROM THE PLAYSTATION2 HARDWARE, GOD OF WAR IS A TITLE TO BE MISSED AT YOUR PERIL"

#### **GOD MODES**

God Of War's action might seem slightly onenote without the magic abilities handed down to you by the deities of Olympus. The four powers - freezing, lightning and two smartbomb-esque screen-fillers - aren't remarkable in themselves, but things get more interesting when you realise the 'freeze' function is activated by holding Medusa's severed head out for your enemies to behold. Combined with your ability to upgrade magic and weapons based on which you use most - and the small number of uses for each that can be squeezed from the magic bar - God Of War is a constant process of prioritising in order to survive.



Medusa's head is an excellent defence. No blood-scorpions, though.

(located on a huge mountain chained to a Titan's back) and Hades' Underworld itself. But that's not to say God Of War will appeal solely to mythology freaks. Anyone who has seen Harryhausen's Clash Of The Titans will be in familiar territory here; enemies such as the Hydra, a giant Minotaur, and Medusa, the fabled, snake-haired queen of the Gorgons, all make an appearance, and all are dwarfed by Ares himself, who strides through Athens crushing thousands of arrow-flinging troops beneath his sandalled feet.

Of course, scale is nothing without gameplay, and the weapon-wielding aspects of God Of War more than stand up on their own merits. Kratos' primary weapon - a set of dual blades fused to the hero's wrists with molten metal chains - flow as well as any action engine yet devised, with one fluid movement seamlessly stretching into the next. There are hundreds of contextspecific moves to be learned and pulled off in the heat of battle too, bolstered by an easily mastered parry system that deflects most enemy attacks and slows the action down momentarily so Kratos might deliver a well-timed coup de grace. Other moves, as with Dante's own misadventures. propel enemies skyward and enable them to be juggled with a mighty combo of speedy exchanges, while using the various finishing moves encourages moment-to-moment snap decisions by altering the type and volume of

#### TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM



The Hydra. Or, at least, one of its three heads. Meet a huge boss like this during the first level and you know you're playing a game worthy of the 'epic' tag.



It's Ares, God of war himself. He's a big bugger too. It's around this point the quest begins to feel beyond the realms of a mere mortal, no matter how much brutality you display.



○ We died and went to the Underworld. Screaming souls fall from the sky into the River Styx below. One misstep, and our hero will find himself dismissed for a red hot early bath.

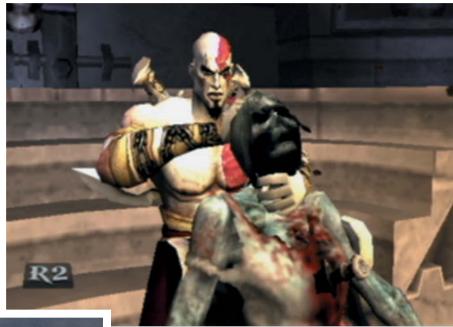
essential collectables awarded with each kill.

And while many other titles (and again, we're thinking of a certain blond nancy boy) promote the avid gathering of coloured orbs, few cause the level of uncertainty as to which powers are best strengthened for the coming onslaught as that elicited by God Of War. In this sense, players are encouraged to explore the environment for the most positive of reasons rather than for the sake of proud completion value; the upgrades, as well as strengthening the power of each magic ability or weapon at hand, unlock enough new moves to force further mastery of each instrument of bloodletting. In short, upgrading is necessary throughout God Of War, and though there is no wrong turn in terms of boosting these abilities, the style of customisation adopted by each player has a direct effect on the manner in which they approach each battle.

However, Sony's title is rarely content with providing finger-hurting tapathon battles without the inclusion of some of fiendish puzzles. These tasks, which punctuate the action at regular intervals, are often far simpler to solve than they first appear (though we'd attest that such is the signature of a great gaming puzzle), and sometimes tough enough to set your overall quest back by up to half an hour of frustration. It's here that perhaps the developer shows the greatest understanding of drama (in the classical, Greek sense, of course), and perfectly places these peaks and troughs of silent pause to interrupt the wails of bloody, cinematic action.

#### KILLED WITH ONE FINGER

Though many enemies in God Of War can simply be hacked at until they dissolve into a puddle of shadow, most bad guys you meet have a character-specific finishing move, which will activate when they are a few blows away from death. Here, pressing the grab button will cause Kratos to finish his foe by the most brutal of means, with smashing a siren's head repeatedly into the floor standing as a highlight. However, stronger enemies require more than a single button press, with a series of keystrokes and analogue waggles needed to send them to the Underworld. Defeating Medusa, for example, requires the player to twist the pad while Kratos twists at her head, before eventually popping it clean from her torso. And that, in essence, is why we play games...





If this looks formidable, wait until you reach the Underworld. All the enemies constantly exude fire there.

Nor does the game's design favour a certain style of puzzle: giant blocks must be twisted and stacked in three dimensions; secret pathways must be sought based on the flimsiest of clues; pillars must be dragged and kicked across vast open spaces to the most exact of positions. Indeed, such is the immensity of some of the largest puzzles that the player's response to a possible solution is often, 'that can't be it - the game can't be that good,' but repeatedly those initial, instinctive responses informed by a gaming shorthand learned by playing through many weaker puzzles in inferior games - proves entirely correct. It's a proud moment for gaming in general as well as for the player, and one of the reasons that God Of War makes you glad other people are sitting in the room to observe the game's progression.

Just as surprising, though, is the level of weight everything in God Of War's universe displays. In a world built from stone and wood, every one of Kratos' actions seems like a Herculean challenge, from the slightest swipe of the blade to the weariest pull of a rusted lever. Combined with the simply stunning cut-scenes, which would sit comfortably

in the pantheon of the finest movies scattered throughout a videogame, Sony leaves the gamer lost in one of the most immersive, reality-grounded worlds we can remember. And that's taking into account the level of otherworldly hokum on display.

In truth, there's little holding God Of War back from perfection: a little too much screen tagging here and there when the game-controlled camera shifts; the slightest hint of a developer limited by the technological abilities of its chosen format (particularly when enemies are forced to respawn rather than march onscreen as a formidable army to begin with); perhaps a few too many instant death scenarios. Otherwise, it's an unmitigated joy to play from start to finish, not only offering enough unlockable features to encourage replay, but worthwhile, truly fascinating insights into its development at that. A masterful game that gets the very most from the PlayStation2 hardware, God Of War is a title to be missed at your peril.



You'll need more than a tin of Chappie to distract Cerberus from your imminent demise.

#### O. ANOTHER HACK-AND-SLASH PLATFORMER?

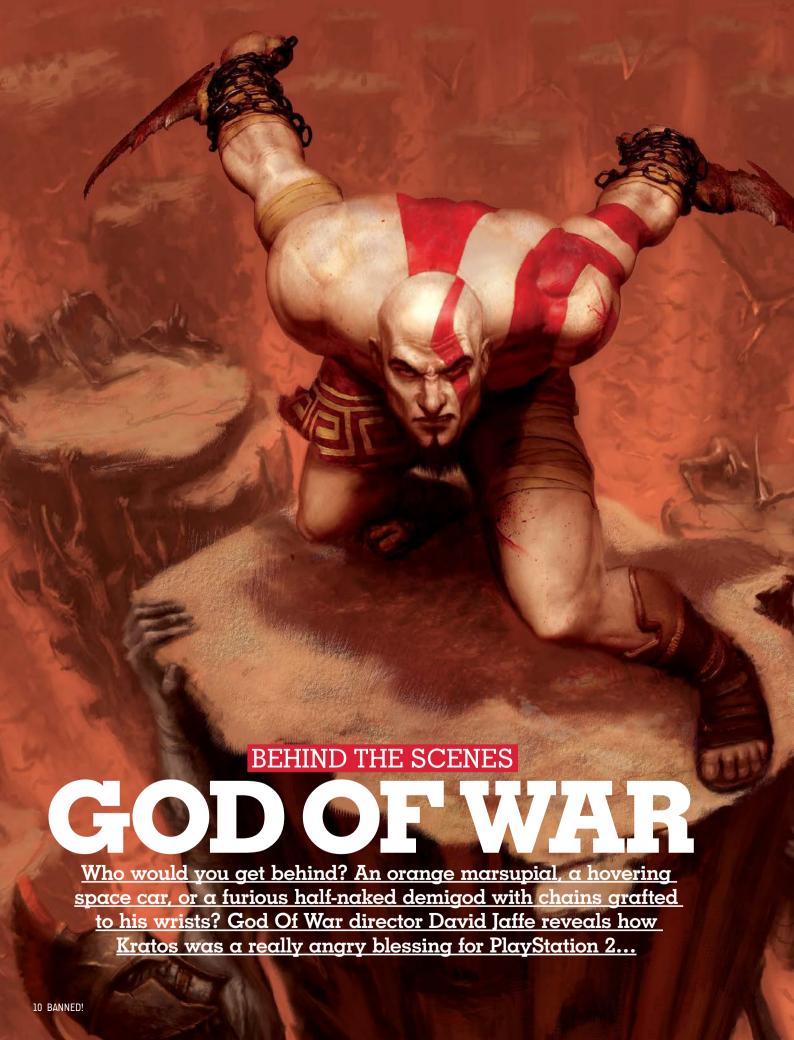
Yes, but don't doze off yet. It's actually a superb blend of action, thought and aweinspiring grandeur.

#### Q. BUT I HAVEN'T FINISHED DEVIL MAY CRY 3 YET.

And you probably won't. It's an immensely difficult game.

#### Q. SO THIS ONE'S A BIT EASIER?

Not much, but it's a lot more varied than Capcom's button-basher.





MASCOTS COME IN all shapes and sizes. If there were some perfect creation process, chances are the most successful gaming heroes of all time wouldn't be an out-of-shape plumber and a hedgehog that isn't even the right colour. No, there's no science to it all, hence why we probably shouldn't be all that surprised that Sony's unexpected mascot for the PS2 era came in the form of gaming's angriest man. The last great example of a platform holder giving one of its studios almost full creative control over a project could easily have gone so badly wrong, but the history books tell us otherwise - God Of War managed to make ancient history exciting for a whole new audience, just as Clash Of The Titans had done nearly 25 years earlier, with cutting edge technology once again at the forefront of bringing legends back to life and capturing the imaginations of a generation. .

Strange to think, then, that God Of War might never have existed had one of the other options on the table at the time been given the green light first. Founding father of the franchise, game director and personable semi-automatic cuss rifle David Jaffe talks us through some of the other options and, with all due respect, it isn't hard to see why Kratos came out on top. "I was looking at a game - we were calling it Dead Man at the time – and it was an open-world first-person game," he reveals. "It wasn't exactly survival horror - it wasn't so slow-paced - but it was trying to do like an action-adventure set in the Louisiana swamps and bayou about voodoo and supernatural powers, so the character would have these abilities and powers. I liked the idea of doing an open-world, first-person game and there hadn't been a lot of those at the time." Given that Shadow Man never exactly took off to the degree Acclaim would have hoped and the technical limitations of PS2, we can't say we're entirely surprised to hear that a game we only just heard about was cancelled a decade ago.

"Another one that didn't get as far came from us talking a lot about trying to create a way for gameplay to evoke the same kind of emotions as watching *Lupin* 

III, the one that Miyazaki did," Jaffe continues. "How could we make a game that puts you in that same kind of feeling of high adventure?" The spirit of this project seemed to make it into the final game, even if the original pitch never really got off the ground. Indeed, there was always a clear front-runner for some of the team, it would appear, and Jaffe confirms as much. "Those were competing for the longest time but then I think it was ultimately was Ken Feldman, who was the art director on all of them, who said that out of all of the ideas, it was the God Of War universe that we'd best be able to realise in a really spectacular way. That was when we finally said 'Fuck it, let's go with this one'."

Hell, it wasn't even God Of War back then. "After Twisted Metal Black shipped, we spent probably four or five months iterating about four ideas – talking to the team, seeing what they would be into, fleshing out some of the concepts to see which one had the greatest potential. From that, ultimately Dark Odyssey – which became God Of War – won out, kicking off with the high concept of 'What if Paul Verhoeven had directed Clash Of The Titans?' but we changed that to 'What if Ridley Scott had directed Clash Of The Titans?' for the second document because nobody knew who Paul Verhoeven was."

Lack of cinema knowledge on the production team's end aside, it seems as though Jaffe and his team had prepared concepts for God Of War that differed radically from that original seed. "I still have a document showing the very adult, edgy and violent version of what this game could be, which is obviously what it became, but also all the way down to sort of Disney's Hercules... maybe we'd do something that was a little more Mario," he tells us. "We originally started out with the idea of doing first-person melee, so God Of War was originally going to be firstperson. It didn't get very far - we talked to some of the programmers about it and did a lot of research. Dreamcast had a game out at the time that was kind of the best in breed for first-person melee, called Maken X. We studied that a lot trying to figure out if we



### **DELETED SCENES**

David Jaffe on the sequences that didn't quite make the cut



#### THE LIFT

"We built a wonderful level which you can see on some of the behind-the-scenes materials – an elevator through the desert level. With that elevator level, we

couldn't figure out how to get the sand to trap the elevator, so we had to table that."

#### THE WINGS

"We had the Icarus wings in the first game too and even though I think they look beautiful in the third game, I liked the way we were talking about using them in our game. It was more of a Joust mechanic more about full three-dimensional

exploring, combat and flying and less about that kind of tunnel where you're just dodging obstacles. But that's one fucking beautiful tunnel in God Of War III."

#### THE LABYRINTH

"Tobin designed a level that I ended up ripping off for *Twisted Metal* [2012]. It was a maze that started with Kratos in this big open environment, with the walls coming up and down in real-time and changing the level layout. So it was about being in this space that was constantly changing and having to adjust. So we ended up using that for the arena level in Twisted Metal on PS3, but I regret that not going because that was such a cool idea."



could make it work. And GTA III had just come out, so we were kicking around the idea of open world. So yeah, it really was a very broad initial conceptual phase while we were looking at this idea and a couple of others, and it just sort of evolved into God Of War through a great deal of combat and fighting and yelling at each other."

Even though Jaffe is clearly talking about the design process there, he's done an equally good job of describing the game the team ended up making - loud, brash and with precious few pulled punches. That said, the game's violent streak was all kinds of intentional and for a number of reasons. "As a kid I'd seen and read family-friendly Greek mythology, but I was reading Edith Hamilton to research a lot of this stuff before we went into development and the stories themselves can be easily read to be very gruesome and violent. It was definitely a good fit," explains Jaffe. "It wasn't like we were saying we wanted to do an ultra-violent Lego game - it was more about taking that mythology and playing up the angle that it was really violent, which seems to be something our audience really responds to. It was just having the awareness to spot that match and allow us a better shot at retail."

HOLD UP A SECOND – did the games industry's resident swear grenade just cough up some retail jargon? Fear not, the decision to make  $God\ Of\ War\ \alpha$  bloody rampage wasn't entirely written in dollar signs – it was as much a creative decision as it was a commercial one. "I like violent stuff," Jaffe reveals, to the surprise of literally nobody who has ever played a game the man has worked on. "That's why I said Paul Verhoeven in the original pitch – I like that fun, over-the-top, acrobatic violence in movies and games. But I remember being very clear about the fact that we'd have to make sure that this was brutal and intense because if we didn't add that layer, it would look like you were just a dude running around in a helmet and a toga."

And perhaps that's why this cultural vein hadn't really been tapped at all during gaming's difficult teenage years – good as the source material may have been, nobody could find that angle to make it exciting and fresh. That takes passion, which Jaffe clearly has in spades. He has a deep-seated love for the subject matter and, as evidenced by the best historical shooters, wartime RTS games and even football management titles, sometimes that's enough of a spark to light up a classic. "Greek mythology







God Of War manages to keep the pace slick, the settings beautiful, the action fresh and the body count high NowGamer, 2005 has been something that I've loved since I was in like fourth grade," he shares. "Clash Of The Titans was an extremely flawed, wonderful movie – when you're ten years old and watching it, it's just, like... wow. That was the summer of '81 when Clash Of The Titans came out, Raiders Of The Lost Ark had come out, and when you look at God Of War, there's clearly a great deal of influence from both of those films. It's like superheroes – it's totally ready to go for videogame creation, with all these amazing powers, monsters, abilities and locations. And very few people had trodden that territory at

Since nobody had done a proper mythological adventure in quite some time, it stands to reason that another would be announced while Sony Santa Monica's baby was still in the womb. "I remember once, we were waist-deep in development of God

that time."

Of War and we saw a story online about a game... what the fuck was that game called? It came and it went and it got horrible reviews but to see it and to see their concept art and to read their PR, we just thought we were gonna be so fucking dead," recalls Jaffe. "They beat us to the punch, those sons of bitches!" Fortunately for Sony, this is the games industry, and not every title has the heavyweight credentials or the vision to turn a great concept into a great game, and Jaffe tells us about the moment the competition stopped... well, competing. "We saw it at E3 and breathed a sigh of relief – it wasn't all that great, not to be disrespectful to the people

who made it but clearly they were hampered by budget issues."

WHETHER HE'S TALKING about Rygar or Shadow Of Rome or any number of the nine million other PS2 games we've forgotten is kind of irrelevant – it's a classic scenario that we see to this day (albeit

## I WAS HEAVILY INFLUENCED - AND I'M SURE I'M NOT ALONE BY RAY HARRYHAUSEN AND HIS WORK

to a lesser extent, now that budgets on triple-A games have gone daft) where lesser publishers and developers will sniff out popular themes for upcoming hits and try to outrun them. We can count on one hand the number of times it has really worked out, so maybe the budget hike has actually helped out in that regard. But even so, how was it that God Of War stumbled upon this content goldmine that every other game just strolled past on the way to work each day?

"I guess it has to do with influences, right?," reasons Jaffe. "I was heavily influenced – and I'm sure I'm not alone – by Ray Harryhausen and his work. That was always something that appealed to me and







Difficult to resist the urge to simply genuflect and be humbled to be in the presence of such digital divinity

Game Informer, Issue 145 May 2005



something I wanted to play with. It was around the time that we were doing God Of War that we were starting to see a shift towards budgets going up pretty significantly. There was that time too when PSone was still out towards the beginning of PS2 and development was still inexpensive enough that you would see all these different games, things like Second Sight and Psi-Ops – there was this game on PSone, Tale Of The Sun or something,

game on Psone, Iale Of The Sun or something, about a fucking caveman! — which are the kinds of subjects that are now more the world of indies, because they're affordable and you can take those kinds of chances. We came at the end of that, when most games had started having to play safe, whether it was military shooters or, at the time, crime sims like GTA. But Sony being Sony was always so great about letting their developers explore things that aren't just marketing-sanctioned safe genres and we were still allowed to play in those waters."

Today's market, of course, is somewhat different. Big name studios and publishers have shut up shop and others have tightened purse-strings, while unrealistic goals have seen successful games be judged otherwise. "I think it'd be really hard and expensive to compete today purely on spectacle," Jaffe nods. "But what's cool is that there are elements of God Of War that have nothing to do with the spectacle – level design, story, characters – that you can do with two or three people with a copy of Unity or Game Maker Pro. That's phenomenal and in that way, the market is wonderful today. But I think if you're talking about building a game where the total reason for it to exist is spectacular setpieces... it's still doable for sure but you have to have a lot of fucking money.

That was the reason I went away after that game and moved onto more mechanics-based titles. You're only as good as your tech on that day. I want our games to stand up even after the visuals aren't as hot as they once were, where the core mechanics are something you could come back to ten years later and say 'Okay, it's really rough but fuck, it's still really fun'. I don't think I've achieved that yet but working with that game

#### I WANT OUR GAMES TO STAND UP TEN YEARS LATER

showed me that for me, that was sort of the North Star to follow. If you just chase the spectacle, the applause you get for it is pretty fucking cheap."

SPECTACLE MUST HAVE been fairly high on the agenda in creating God Of War, mind. But were there any examples of tech not being able to match concept? "The game was so scripted that there wasn't a lot," Jaffe muses. "When we asked for something and they said they couldn't do it, usually that was coming from production rather than tech." One issue, though, would have given Digital Foundry a collective heart attack. "There was the giant crusher at the bottom of Pandora's temple and [the guys] just kept throwing enemies in until it dropped to like 12fps. But we all thought it was fucking awesome – we didn't care that it was 12fps 'cause the idea was so cool and it still worked. But then Tim came over and you'd have

#### > A GAMING EVOLUTION Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver > God Of War > Bayonetta



Raziel's starring role was a game about spectacle and a journey, two areas on which Jaffe and his team spent a lot of time.



Witches, angels, swearing and a bit of the old ultra-violence... Platinum's hardcore action game takes it to the next level.



thought that his head was about to explode. We fought about frame rate. I care about frame rate only when it hampers the game. So we fought about that, but there was one fight I did lose. I just couldn't convince Tim and Mike and even to this day I'm like 'What the fuck?' – I think he must have made a deal with the devil saying 'I will make you a great programmer but you must never use translucency in any game' or something. I kept saying that we had to have the environment go semi-transparent or we'd have to pull the camera too far back, and we wanted to keep the



camera close so it was more dramatic. Almost every other game out there was making the characters and/or the environment go semi-transparent, but you'd have thought I was asking him to go assassinate his parents or something. It was not going to be done on his motherfucking watch. It was fucking bad and even to this day, you can tell I'm still a little annoyed by it, because we could have had some amazing cinematic moments in that game if it weren't for the fact that the goddamn engine didn't support tranlucency."

For all that it may seem like  $God\ Of\ War$  might today be a case of style over substance – especially with so many unlikely usurpers in the likes of Revengeance, Bayonetta and DmC strutting their hardcore action stuff – that absolutely wasn't the case with the original. Jaffe reflects on meetings of minds where gameplay had to come first. "The guys at Santa Monica are some of the best of the best when it comes to programming. And whenever I asked for something or heard a great idea from the team, most of the time a month later it was in the game. They were a pretty impressive group to work with." Have the special effects guys kill the rainbows and the twinkly music, though – this is Jaffe we're talking to, not Bono. "But they were a pain in the ass to work with, and I'm sure they'd say the



■ Petrified? Worry not – escaping is as easy as waggling an analog stick.

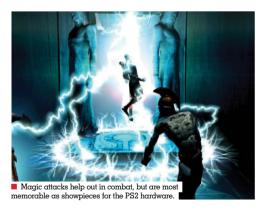






same about me," he admits. "Tim and I really didn't get along very well. Me being American and him being British, him being a programmer and me being more of a high-level designer... just one against the other, even just culturally, that can sometimes be enough to break the camel's back. But when you've got cultural and discipline differences and you put those people on a project for three years together? I'd work with Tim again, I don't know if he'd work with me but I respect him greatly as a programmer. We got along fine outside of it. But as colleagues, I fucking wanted to blow his head off every single day and I think he probably wanted to do the same thing to me."

Internal struggles aside, it all looked rosy just as soon as the Hydra demo hit and people got to experience the game themselves. But even with that buzz going around, there was still enough apprehension to make the team second-guess themselves at every turn, as Jaffe vividly recalls. "I remember being at the office with Todd Papy, looking up at this giant poster of Kratos that we'd had made for E3 - it still hangs in the Sony Santa Monica office, actually - and thinking This is going to be fucking huge'. But within a week, I was in Gamestop and saw the God Of War 'coming soon' box and it was stuck way up high on the shelf out of the way. Nothing had changed - if anything, the game had only gotten better as we got closer to completion - but I remember thinking it was going to fucking tank and be a disaster." But, as it happens, God Of War was quite a good videogame (hence this celebration) and such a success for Sony that it's now easily one of the leading PlayStation brands. But there wasn't always such confidence, even internally. "On the day of release, a friend of mine texted me to say









#### ON LETTING GO

Teel an attachment to the first and accompany you don't belong to can't exactly be easy, but David Jaffe is surprisingly upfront about how he managed to avoid forging bonds with Kratos as a character. 'I feel an attachment to the first and second

games," he tells us.
"The others are titles that I have great respect for – friends of mine have worked on them, some that I hold in incredibly high regard. I love to see them succeed, and as a company as well given the investment.

But I don't feel an attachment. I feel a connection to the first two titles but post-GOWII, I've had zero regrets. I've watched them and cheered them on from the sidelines but I don't feel like it's my character out there or anything like that."









It's set in
Greece with
the mighty
Kratos...
and we
loved every
minute
of it
Play, issue 129
May 2005

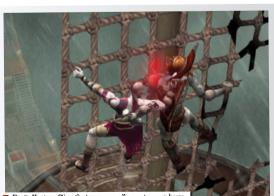


there was a line out the door at the game store," Jaffe tells us. "I thought he was full of shit but there totally

was this line out the door. We had days when we thought we were onto something and days where we sat around figuring out what our next careers were going to be 'cause we were clearly no good at this."

Some critics would argue that there's a case to be made for the latter, especially in light of some of the game's end-game sequences. "Well, Tobin did the spikes," smiles Jaffe as his new studio explodes with enough laughter to level a small village. The accused interjects.

"You were just supposed to get knocked down the spikes a little bit, just so you wouldn't get stuck on them," explains level designer Tobin A. Russell. "You weren't supposed to get knocked off entirely." The problem, it seems, was born of over-confidence. "The coders promised they were going to deal with the collision on that," Jaffe confesses. "But what happened



Do it, Kratos. Give that guy a really nasty rope burn.
The demigod's violent streak can never be sated.

was we had focus-tested the shit out of that game and it's a linear process so by the time we got to focus-

#### [HADES] WAS THE LAST LEVEL OF THE GAME, SO WE DIDN'T FOCUS TEST THAT ONE, AND IT BIT US IN THE ASS

testing Hades – which is where that area is, at the end of the level – we were just like 'Nah, we got it, we're good'. It was literally the last level of the game so we didn't focus test that one, and that was the one that bit us in the ass. I regret that section, because it really was a shelf moment for a number of gamers."

Issues aside, it's fair to say that God Of War carved out a template for a generation of would-be mascots to follow. But, as it turns out, some of the biggest names in the business can't tell you when they're onto something. "It was all just a big fucking blur," Jaffe admits. "There were a lot of nights where we were there until three in the morning and those nights blend into the other nights. There are people that you meet that you'd want to work with for the rest of your career, then there are people that I have wonderful memories of but won't speak to today. I can't fucking stand some of them today and some of them I think are just amazing. There are all these little moments that sort of add up to give you a recollection of an experience that, in my mind, was extremely hard but extremely fulfilling and extremely worthwhile. We made something that we're really proud of."

#### REVIEW | FOOTBALL MANAGER | PC



PLAYERS

MINIMUM SPEC Pentium 4 1.8GHz processor, 256Mb system RAM, 8x CD-ROM drive



## FOOTBALL MANAGER 2005

THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR TO CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER IS THE FIRST OUT OF THE BLOCKS



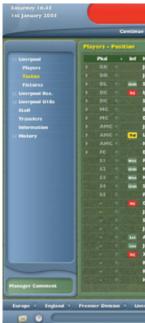
ver since Sports Interactive and Eidos announced they were parting company, armchair football managers have been holding their breath to see where each company

would take the genre next. Championship
Manager has been doing all the talking so far. The
usual big marketing budget has seen sponsorship
of Sky One's The Match and high public
awareness of Eidos' effort, but the news from
within the company is not good; a poor showing
at Game Stars Live has now been augmented by a
delay until 2005 for Championship Manager 5,
meaning valuable ground has been lost before a
ball has even been kicked. Sports Interactive, on
the other hand, appears to have kept its head
down and concentrated purely on the game itself.
Not for this team the grand posturing; the

company seems to have invested all its time and effort into making the game and then doing the marketing. And it seems to have paid off.

Put simply, Football Manager 2005 is the best football management game Sports Interactive has produced to date, and will cost football fans just as many hours as its predecessors in the Championship Manager series. God is in the details and, as always, SI has pulled out all the stops to ensure that the virtual world of Football Manager is deeper and more believable than in any other sports management title. To begin with, there are more playable countries than ever before, from the English Premiership to the Indian Championship. The game also goes deeper than Championship Manager did, with the chance to take charge of teams from, say, the Conference North and South in England. Ever fancied taking Weymouth to Premiership glory? Now you can.

Many players now have photographs included as part of their profiles too, which, odd as it may sound, makes the game feel much deeper. Yes, everyone knows what Michael Owen looks like, but take over a side in the lower leagues and having an actual image of what Joe Bloggs the full-back looks like draws the player even deeper into an imaginary world. The match engine has also been refined and improved so that players react in a much more realistic way. One of the most frustrating things about Championship Manager 4's match engine was the way defenders would often lash the ball behind for a corner despite being under little or no pressure to do so. In Football Manager, better players will remain calm under pressure rather than panicking (with the possible exception of Phil Neville) and this makes match days much less stressful.



Tactical options have been refined and improved for SI's first outing with Sega.

Fancy undertaking a season as Weymouth?



#### FAQs

#### O. IS IT POSSIBLE TO PLAY THE GAME ONLINE?

Although not really designed as an online game, it is possible to play a league over the net or a LAN. It'll take a while, though...

#### Q. WILL GENERATED PLAYERS HAVE PHOTOGRAPHS TOO?

SI ran a competition where fans were invited to send in pictures of themselves. These photos will be used to represent new players in the future.

#### O. CAN YOU PLAY AS AN INTERNATIONAL MANAGER FROM THE START?

Yes, this option will be available immediately for those who want to test themselves against



Perhaps the biggest addition to the game over the elements that were included in Champ Manager is increased interaction with the media. Managers will now be chatting regularly to the press about their chances in upcoming matches, as well as voicing their opinions of fellow managers. This opens up the chance to begin long-running feuds with fellow championship contenders, firing up the player's team in the process. Everyone knows that the hatred between Wenger and Ferguson adds something extra when Arsenal meet Manchester United, and now it's possible for Football Manager players to make footballing enemies (and friends) of their own. Suggesting that your forthcoming opponents 'have to win' your top-of-the-table clash could heap extra pressure on their playing staff then again, it could result in your own players getting cocky and slipping up.

Elsewhere, it is very much a case of improving on lots of small elements to create a game that is better in every way. Those who like to head off into

the smaller nations around the world and ply their trade will no doubt be grateful for the 'rules' menu that accompanies each league, informing would-be managers of any transfer restrictions, how many European places are up for grabs and suchlike. Another welcome inclusion is the fact that the front end doesn't have to be locked for *Football Manager* to process other results. Although it will run quicker if the front end is locked, you can have results processing in the background while the manager scouts for players and so on.

However, Football Manager is much more than the sum of its many parts. Games like this succeed because they suck the player into a virtual world of their own creation and never let them go. Football Manager does so in spectacular style. The gauntlet has been thrown down triumphantly, and only time will tell if Championship Manager will be able to compete. One thing's for certain, though – it will need to be bloody good to even stand a chance.







Xbox

ORIGIN

US

PUBLISHER Microsoft

DEVELOPER

Valve PRICE

£39.99

RELEASE

19 June 1999

PLAYERS 1-4 (1-16 online)

GLOBA

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

LIVE'S 'KILLER APP' SEEMS TO HAVE LOST SOMETHING...

## **COUNTER-STRIKE**

e're all for finding new homes for improved versions of the world's best games, but only on one condition – that the new title be at least as good as that which

spawned it. As you can probably work out from the score at the bottom of the page, *Counter-Strike* has been telling us all about how a funny thing happened on the way to the Xbox, but our attention just keeps wandering. We want to love it, really we do, but by tearing it to pieces, removing all semblance of a single-player game and charging £40 for what is effectively a free, ageing PC download, Valve isn't making it easy for us to do so.

The main problem with this version of the seminal online shooter took a while to pin down, but after hours of on- and offline team play it hit us

like an Arctic Warfare Magnum. Not only does this look nigh-on identical to the PC version (and therefore inferior to many Xbox titles), it still feels as though the two analogue sticks used to control your operative are but a placeholder for the mouse/

keyboard combo that shot *Counter-Strike* to fame. But it still manages to capture the feel of the original game, and the sense of camaraderie, mortality and potential during team play, particularly with friends, remains a thing of beauty.

Call us naïve but when Microsoft announced the potential for downloadable content for its Xbox titles, we thought this would be new material. Instead, Counter-Strike chops out many of the finer levels and modes from an already lacklustre package - where are 747, Assault and the VIP levels? - only to offer these online later in a show of false generosity. For all its inherent flaws, though, this is still among the best experiences you'll get from Xbox Live, and even after all this time the ageing modes and maps easily rival anything that we've seen since the original release. Old maps like Italy and Dust still retain their charm after years of play, and the new additions bolster the roster wonderfully: it's just a shame that the single-player side of the game has



WORSE THAN

RAINBOW SIX 3

VERDICT 0/10
AN ONLINE GEM - ONE FOR LIVE PLAYERS ONLY

DOWINLOAD THIS: New content will regularly appear on Live. We'll have an as\_oilrig, please.

LY: Online play is pretty much as, much to our relief.

Unsubtle it may be but we do have a soft spot for the Heavy Machine Gun – the perfect way to waste ammunition.

200 4



The Kevlar Suit is an optional accessory, but unlike those oh-so-ghetto hoop earrings this one could save your skin. Literally.



Offline play presents some questionable Al from the bots, but in Live mode it's hard to find fault with the anti-terrorist antics.



Decapitations are the order of the day throughout the game, and the heads of your victims make great footballs



■ The physics engine is one of Postal 2s few qualities, making for some ssive randoll deaths and object interactions



■ The game is filled with self-parody, and includes the Running With Scissors offices complete with bad-boy CEO Vince Desi himself.

FUNNY GUY: Postal 2 features 'tongue-in-ass humour', as creator Vince Desi describes it. HOLY WAR: Watch in awe as gun-toting vicars take on a band of Islamic fundamentalists.

ORIGI US

**PUBLISHER** 

Whiptail Interactive

**DEVELOPER** 

Running With Scissors

**PRICE** 

£29.99 RELEASE

13 April 2003

**PLAYERS** 

MINIMUM SPECS

733MHz processor 128MB RAM, 1.2GB HDD space, 32MB video card

## POSTAL 2

BANNED IN

#### A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE SHOPS, DARLING...

ix years have passed since the infamous Postal was released amidst a blaze of controversy over its shameless portrayal of gratuitous violence and political incorrectness,

the likes of which had never been seen before in a videogame. Needless to say, when developer Running With Scissors announced the sequel would parade an all-new first-person perspective (with Unreal engine and Karma physics technology to boot), eyebrows were raised by censors and wannabe psychopaths alike.

Whilst Postal 2's distinctively dark brand of humour may not be everyone's cup of tea, we believe that originality is originality - no matter how depraved - and were particularly intrigued by the game's promised level of non-linearity. When Postal Dude leaves his trailer-park home with a list of everyday errands, such as buying milk or returning a library book, his destiny is placed entirely in your hands. While you could choose to make his journey to the shops an uneventful one, crossing a town crammed with tempting opportunities for any budding serial killer makes this a very unlikely prospect indeed. Similarly, the tasks themselves can be approached in a number of ways. On reaching the shop you could simply wait in line with everyone else, decide instead to urinate all over your fellow citizens to persuade them to leave the queue, or

resort to dousing the whole lot of them in petrol and flinging a match their way. And then urinate on them.

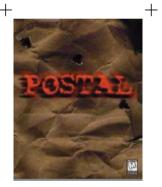
Sadly, this superb potential for freeform gameplay is completely lost in the disappointing quality of its delivery. The game features some of the most abysmal combat we've seen in an FPS for some time, with baffling inconsistencies to the damage your shots inflict and some laughably flawed Al. Likewise, interiors are terribly primitive and come sparsely furnished with objects made from the crudest geometric shapes. By far our biggest gripe about the game, however, has to be the frustrating regularity of load points, each involving an unwelcome break in play of around 45 seconds. These points are helpfully signposted, but each zone is relatively small and you may be forced to cross several of these en route to your destination. The accumulation of these faults ultimately undermines any desire to explore for long, and makes for an altogether less entertaining affair than the wanton killing sprees GTA3 allows players to perform between missions as a mere a supplement to the main game itself.

> VERDICT 5/10 GREAT POTENTIAL RUINED BY AWFUL EXECUTION





Banned in more than ten countries and blacklisted in the USA, Postal mailed itself right into the hands of the antigamers but, 14 years on, it's hard to see what all the fuss was about



Ripcord Games Running With Scissors

#### KEY STAFF:

Vince Desi Executive Producer Randy Briley Art Director Steve Wik Level Design **Amy Searcy** 

Associate Producer York, which produced Spy Vs. Spy as well as

WHEN YOU CONSIDER Vince Desi's approach to gaming, you can't help but wonder how he ever stomached making titles for children in a "previous life". Unfailingly controversial and revelling in his alpha male status, his company's website is packed with beautiful, busty babes, and, when Desi appeared in Uwe Boll's film adaptation of his most well-known of games, Postal - a violently graphic, boundary pushing, first-person shooter of unabashed anarchy - he did so dressed as a giant penis.

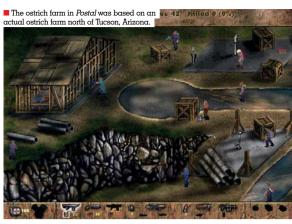
And that wasn't even his first taste of a film set. "I've been on film locations before," he says, "but they were always porn shoots." And neither was the film the first time he had seen eyebrows raised at his creative endeavours. Not when 1997's Postal ended up being blamed for the stabbing of eight people in a Moscow synagogue, banned in New Zealand

and labelled "digital poison" by senator Joseph Lieberman. Ashamed? Nah. Desi just shrugs it all off. "The world is on fire, so grab your gas can and have some fun," he laughs.

And yet it all started so innocently, with Desi having begun his career in the early Eighties, working as a consultant for Atari before teaming up with Mike Jaret Riedel to create Riedel Software Productions in New

Tom & Jerry and Bobby's World for the SNES. "We wanted to make an original game we would own and be able to build on," he recalls of his need to move away from innocent games for children. "Before Postal, everything we did was work for hire, making games based on kids' licenses like Sesame Street and Disney characters." That wasn't something Desi was willing to continue doing for the rest of his career.

Around him were a team of likeminded people who also wanted to produce something with a bit more meat. So they began to brainstorm from the company's new offices in Tuscon, CONTINUED >.







#### THE WORLD IS ON FIRE, SO GRAB YOUR **GAS CAN AND HAVE** SOME FUN









#### Posted by: BILGE RAT

▲ I never played the first game, but Postal 2 was awesome. I loved the character of Postal Dude at the time. He was really badass and had some brilliantly funny lines. You probably thought you weren't gonna die today? Surprise!' 'I suppose it would have been more politically correct to kill the women and the minorities first.' [While dressed as a cop] 'Someone stole my donuts, and now you're all gonna pay!'

#### Posted by:

#### BOB SYKO

▲ I have never actually played Postal – just seen bits and bobs in magazines and online. I did own a copy of Postal 2 but my PC had better judgement than I did and refused to play it. Postal was a childish, gratuitous and purposely offensive romp through bad taste and indecency. Nothing wrong with that.

#### Posted by:

#### REGEMOND

▲ I kind of liked the idea that you could basically ignore the point of the game and, for example, go to the supermarket and just buy some milk. No killing, no maiming, no peeing on Gary Coleman.

#### Posted by: LEERAY666

✓ I owned a copy of *Postal*. It was okay: fun at times, but it got boring.











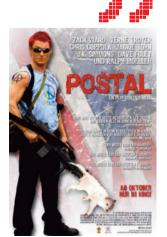


#### WHAT THEY SAID...



It's pretty demented, hence the 17-and-over rating. Other than that, the graphics are choppy and lack detail, and the perspective is a very distant third-person. It's really not that cool.

Game Informer, December 1997



■ Uwe Boll's *Postal* grossed just over \$146,000 on a budget of £15 million.



Arizona, in between blasts of *Robotron*, which was on one of the arcade machines situated in Desi's office. It was that game which gave them the inspiration to try something that was pure gameplay without any nuances getting in the way. They wanted to produce something bold, brash and eye-catching.

"We had several basic foundations," says Desi.
"We wanted it to be an action game and
I insisted that it wouldn't be based on a
soldier saving the world from aliens or
zombies. I wanted it to be reality-based.

zombies. I wanted it to be reality-based. I wanted the violence to be exaggerated, over-the-top, while still having a social compass to it."

One of the first things to go was the company name. It became known as Running With Scissors in an attempt to become a little sharper. But the name for the game would be much more controversial. *Postal* borrows part of

the phrase 'to go postal', which was coined when nine postal employees shot dead 29 fellow workers in separate incidents between 1985 and 1995 in America. To bring out a game just two years after the last such incident with a direct literary reference to the killings – and to make the whole premise of the gameplay one in which the player simply went berserk with a gun – was bound to catch the headlines.

AND IT did, although Desi insists that they approached development with the utmost responsibility. "Most people don't realise it, but the only place in any Postal game in which kids appear is at the end because we lock all the weapons. So while the Postal Dude comes upon a schoolyard, he is unable to shoot, and then the game goes into an ending segment where he is institutionalised. Unfortunately, this was

all lost on the media, and to this day it remains mostly unknown."

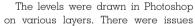
Postal wasn't the only name under consideration, actually. Desi thought 'The Last Nail' would be ideal. But they were very intrigued by the name 'Going Postal', so started to play around with that instead. Desi wanted just one word in the title so it was shortened. And thus development began with in-house artist and designer Steve Wik rapidly getting the project off the

ground. He was among those behind the decision to plump for a three-quarter view. The team believed his hand-painted backgrounds would set the title's visual style apart from other similar games out there at that time.

"We knew we couldn't spend a lot of time on the project but we thought the hand-drawn backgrounds

would be worth it," remembers Desi.

"They were really tedious to do but the good thing was I could walk by an artist and say 'add an outhouse' – little things that make a game that much richer. The only problem with the development process was that it was done in about twelve months and it was a very hectic pace. There were lots of things we had in mind but we couldn't do in such a short period."



from time to time with the code not recognising what should be in front and what should be behind various objects. Wik also had to work on path node networks, and he figured out ways to ensure the non-player characters would move unpredictably – which helped to break up what was, admittedly, *Postal's* extremely repetitive gameplay.

The main character was controlled using the arrow keys, which was familiar territory for PC gamers at the



VINCE DESI
Executive Producer

#### I WANTED THE VIOLENCE TO BE EXAGGERATED WHILE STILL HAVING A SOCIAL COMPASS TO IT

time, even though Wik wanted to use the mouse (and did so when testing the game). This didn't make it into the final product, however, in the interests of allowing people to jump straight into the title without having to learn something new.

As the development went on, furore built up over the project. The United States Postal Service was among those to sue Running With Scissors with a trademark suit that ran on for six years. RWS finally emerged

victorious and Desi angrily hit out saying: "With unlimited financial resources comes unlimited ego. Postal and Postal 2 [which was released by the time the suit was settled in 2003] represent everything the USPS isn't: a successful private enterprise that will never have to rely on an irrevocable government contract to keep its pockets perpetually lined with cash."

Funding – or rather a lack of it – played a major part in Postal's development. Running With Scissors, says Desi, was and remains a small independent company "underfunded and understaffed". "But we have creative designers, artists and coders that stretch the boundaries," he adds. "Advanced supertechno graphics, and so on, was never a concern to us. I'd much rather make a game that is fun to play than beautiful to watch. Go see Michael Bay's latest screen action film if you want digital magic. Postal lets you piss your pants in-game and in real life."

NO WONDER. With Postal Dude nearly always appearing in silhouette – and with no personal background offered except for a penchant for killing pedestrians (the first time innocent passers-by became targets in a game) – the scene was set. Randy Briley was the art director who worked to foster the visual style and this was backed up, not by a musical tune, but ambient sounds. And there was no script. It all happened on the fly with everybody getting involved with ideas.

"I wanted it to be as simple and straightforward as possible," Desi says. "I'm an old dog. I prefer old-style classic Italian cooking to new fusion. I prefer football in real stadia and I prefer women in heels over sneakers. Get the message? New is always good, but as for games I prefer old arcade stuff over today's extravaganzas."

There were some initial plot ideas for the game which involved the main character rescuing people from aliens but this was dropped in favour of just shooting the human bystanders. Wik wasn't happy with the idea but the rest of the team loved it. The only problem was that even Running With Scissors could see that this really would lead them into serious trouble. It was rapidly becoming the kind of game that *The Daily Mail* could easily devote entire editions to. It had to be played for laughs.



### State of play

■ Postal is a game that really pushed – nay, shoved aside – political correctness, and it was no accident: in 2008, Vince Desi told geek.com that the obsession with being politically correct had made us intolerable and that society had gone off-track, saying America was more like a fascist state than ever before. But he also feels that technology

has got in the way of games and that, rather than just go for fun, many of them overtly push messages and agendas. "Historically, I don't think games have tried to push the boundaries of political correctness. The industry is tech-based and not only creative and I think, as it evolved, it missed its purpose – to make great games for people to have fun playing. It's why I love *Mario* and Nintendo."

"Postal is humour. Comedy. Satire. Insanity," Desi surmises. "They go together and they are the base of the Postal series. Cops vomiting from eating doughnuts while pissed, the Cat Silencer, Mike J's bathroom office.... I can go on forever." He chuckles. "Hey, in Postal III we offer a whole new spectrum of insane goofs for gameplay: we have a gay rodeo with rhinos."

It seemed to work, the cheesy dialogue and hand-crafted feel of the game pulling it back from being outright offensive. The Dude didn't have a voice in *Postal* but players heard him think. The devilish thoughts were read by local personality Rick Hunter, and it ensured that Postal Dude was seen as psychotic while keeping things light. But that's not what Desi laughs at the most. "The funniest thing was we were making *Postal* with money from other game contracts, all of which were educational or what they called edutainment," he says. "It was a very

free time, lots of brainstorming, an 'anything goes' attitude."

As for the future? Well, following Postal 2, which was released in 2003, fans have had to wait a long time for Postal III. It was pencilled in for a release in 2008 but has slipped many times since. "But it's all good," says Desi. "We're probably looking at the end of the year. The production this time is in Moscow, although Running With Scissors

did the design. We're as anxious as everyone else."



■ Krotchy is the game's mascot; a walking phallus, who was fittingly played in the film by Vince Desi himself.



■ The hand-drawn backgrounds make Postal look like an even grubbier Syndicate.

#### >. A GAMING EVOLUTION



It was the presence of a Robotron arcade cabinet – not to mention its free-form bloodletting – that inspired Postal's no-frills style.



2005's Super Columbine Massacre RPG encapsulated mindless killing in jaw-dropping style, and proved equally controversial.





Monolith Productions

PRICE

£49 99

RELEASE

PLAYERS

2 December 2005

It's not all violence, you know

there's also the forension

THE NEW FACE OF HORROR

## CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

oo. Did that scare you? Thought not, but trust us; when you pick up a shiny new copy of Condemned: Criminal Origins, you'll be scared six ways from Sunday. True, it's

certainly not the most technologically advanced title in the launch line-up, nor is it one of the most hyped, but what sets Condemned apart from the other next-gen games is that it achieves what it tries to do with frightening precision.

Monolith's latest, following hot on the heels of the magnificent F.E.A.R., is a relatively unambitious title with one singular purpose – to frighten the life out of the gamer and provide the sort of thrills and spills you'd expect from a topnever pretends to be an epic tale of grandiose horror, nor a gothic odyssey into the very depths of hell: it's a simple, first-person cop adventure. This is, perhaps, Condemned's largest asset, but also its Achilles heel. Many will admire the beauty of the game for what it is: an intense journey through some of the most frightening on-screen scenarios ever rendered by a games console. An equally large number will also bemoan the lack of variety, and overall brevity of the game. Rushing through on Easy, with little regard for the extra items that can be picked up

to bolster the player's 360 Gamer Score, the average player should be able to complete the game within six hours. Sadly, the linear nature of Condemned also somewhat negates any potential replay value, meaning that you get comparatively little entertainment time for your money. However, for fans of the horror genre – or indeed any sort of terror-orientated films -Condemned is one of the most intense and enjoyable games ever created.

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE NEXT-GEN HORROR: The advanced visuals and sounds create a spooky atmosphere GAMER SCORES: Collect all the hidden items in this game because they add to your Gamer Score

As a title that presents frightening set-pieces and jump-out-of-your-chair moments, this game is in a league of its own, almost surpassing the critically acclaimed Resident Evil 4 in terms of visceral, horrific action. Monolith has clearly spent months working on and, indeed, perfecting the first-person melee combat, as it really does work within the game. The collision detection is always fair, and the actual impact of a piece of pipe or a spade on your enemies' flesh (or, indeed, on your own face) will always elicit a wince. When an enemy actually jumps out from round a corner to crack you in the mouth with a sign post, a conduit, or whatever else happens to be lying around at the time, it's a genuinely frightening moment and is more than likely to cause a little yelp of surprise from even the most jaded and experienced of horror fans.





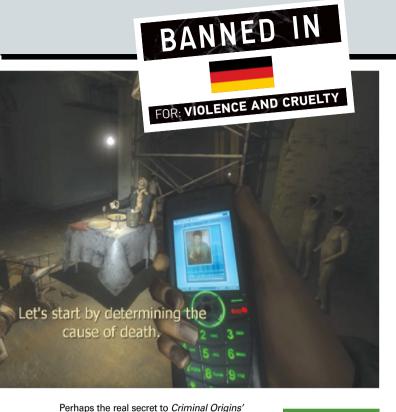
Finishing people off is an incredibly satisfying and messy process. Nice

notch thriller movie such as Se7en or The Ring. It









## after being pitted against some cunning enemies, it certainly seems that Monolith has hit the nail on the head. Your foes will hide around corners, run away to find better weapons, and even pursue you through a level if you don't finish them off properly. To stop their devious ways, why not execute one of *Condemned's* finishing moves and head-butt, punch, slam or break the neck of the submissive freak. Oh, did we mention that this game isn't for the faint of heart...?

The Al in Condemned has been touted as the game's unique selling point, and

**DEADLY DEVIOUS** 

■ Ahh, the Tazer gun – shockingly effective, no matter what the circumstances may be.



frightening success is that the game is more reliant on next-gen visuals than any sort of massive leaps in gameplay dynamics. It's scary because the developer has been given access to the sort of lighting techniques and texture mapping software that has the ability to make levels seem truly foreboding. Each stage of the game is uniquely terrifying because of the details that the Xbox 360's technology has allowed the developer to include. Instead of making everything dark, Monolith has opted for smart lighting, weird and disconcerting surroundings, and some devious use of the console's sound capabilities. When it comes to the crunch and your palms are leaving a greasy residue of sweat on the pad, will you really be able to tell the difference between a shutter clattering in the wind, or a freak snapping some two-by-four off the wall to beat you to death with?

Admittedly, Condemned: Criminal Origins is far from perfect and is unlikely to set a new benchmark in what can be achieved with the Xbox 360's advanced technological capabilities. Yes, the character models look waxy and the last level is something of a farce compared to the rest of the game, but despite all this, Condemned remains a decent effort for a launch title. It may be short as hell, but it's a sweet, scary treat for horror fans and never pretends to be otherwise...

#### CONDEMNED?

Criminal Origins really relies on its looks and audio to create the scares, so it's certainly next-gen in that respect.

#### Q. IS IT ACTUALLY SCARY?

You'd better believe it. Even the most hardened horror buffs will find themselves jumping in fright at some point.

#### Q. ISN'T IT A BIT LIMITED?

Yes, the game is very basic and this is probably why the developer opted to make it quite short.





#### REVIEW | THE PUNISHER | XBOX/MULTIFORMAT



Guys with a floating skull over their heads have information you can beat out of them. Go on – give him the old 'bap, bap, BAP!'.



There are loads of big weapons to unlock, in true Hitman style, by leaving a level with one of them. We like setting people on fire.



## THE PUNISHER

"I'M GOING TO PULL YOUR HEAD OFF, BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE YOUR HEAD"



oor Volition. If you're trying to create a game that involves a man running around shooting other men, chances are you're going to have a hard time making it feel

fresh. Even on a basic level, comparisons to Max Payne were going to be inevitable. But to make matters worse, the game's presentation doesn't do a thing to distance it from Take 2's series: this revenge-driven game starts at the end and is played out in flashback form, complete with poignant monologue from anti-hero Frank Castle. The action itself is solid enough, adding quick kills, interrogations (which are the only way to restore The Punisher's health) and some lovely set pieces to the expected dives and firefights. Snappy one-liners (indeed, dialogue in general) are wonderfully penned and delivered in a suitably cold manner, and this interaction really adds to the satisfaction of slaughter. Score one for Volition, then.

That said, there are some very odd issues with 
The Punisher. For one, the game feels the need to cut to black-and-white and adopt subtler camera angles for all the situation kills, whether it's the understandable pillar-drill-through-head or the rather less gruesome man-falling-a-fewmetres-onto-boxes. Still, with the 18 certificate

sitting so proudly on the front of the box, it's a little strange to discover that it's more conceptual than actual violence earning a BBFC rating. In reality, the little spurts of ketchup and almost bullet-proof skulls pale in comparison to games like *Soldier Of Fortune* and even the 15-rated bloodbath that is *Resident Evil 4*. For a comicbook game so clearly geared around its malevolence, much of the realisation simply doesn't do the imagination and pure gritty violence justice.

Another anomaly is the fact that killing
enemies in style after an interrogation loses
points (despite the fact that reeling them back in
and quickly blasting them in the face earns
points), but despite these quirks *The Punisher*does exactly what it sets out to do. Picking up the
controller gives immediate access to a theatre of
death and destruction, and while originality is
gunned down at some point during the first few
levels, there's plenty of fun to be had, especially
for fans of the comic. Given the potential of the
licence, though, it's just a shame so much
of the game feels so 'by numbers'.

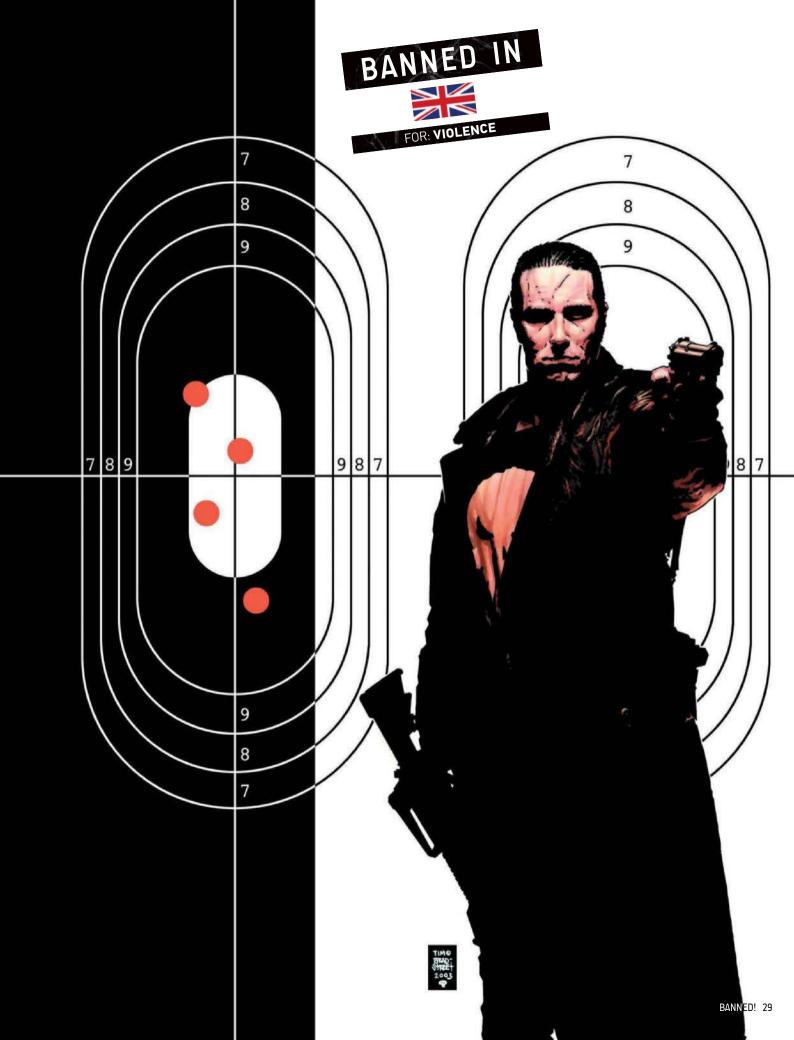








You know what to expect by now – slightly lower-quality visuals and the lack of 5.1 audio aside, you'll be dishing out punishment just the same





 Courting controversy, Canis Canem Edit actually includes a range of side missions including simple schoolboy antics among 'other' things.



By the way, still life art does not involve painting graffiti onto actual living creatures.



English lessons take the form of an anagram game. This is harder than it looks, we can tell you.

## **CANIS CANEM EDIT**

#### ROCKSTAR GIVES AN EDUCATION IN THE OPEN WORLD



raise be for Rockstar. Defiant of convention, courting controversy at every turn, the landscape of the new millennium would be unimaginable without its peculiar blend of scandal and innovation. There's been blood, some of it gratuitous, but let's not forget the cowboys and street racers, the table tennis and vengeful detectives. Few developers have ever cast the net so wide, with such conviction, and great games

have been our reward. But there's still the blood.

Canis Canem Edit could have been a casualty of that well-earned reputation. Originally titled Bully, as if you didn't know, the gap between the initial utterance of that provocative word and the first clear indication of the game's content was enough to create a void into which all manner of unfounded, nannyish vitriol could be poured. There can be no complaint from Rockstar when it comes to the title change; politics loves a vacuum, and it won many enemies when it answered concerns over the violence in GTA with the oppressive brutality of Manhunt. Like we say, the reputation is well earned, though the cumbersome new moniker does suggest a deliberate ploy to force the public to stick to the catchier original.

In truth, *Bully* is somewhat misleading. There is ritualistic violence in Bullworth Academy, but being the flame-haired new kid it is most often aimed at you. An opening cut-scene paints a far-

from-happy family picture as Jimmy is callously discarded at the school gates by his self-involved, abusive parents. Jimmy's troubled background has instilled a deep-seated sense of inequality within him, and, at least initially, the main objective is to restore order between the school's warring cliques by gaining the respect of each.

That these cliques are Nerds, Jocks, Greasers,
Preppies and Dropouts is indicative of the
tone. Closer in spirit to the romanticised whimsy
of John Hughes than the censor-baiting realism
of Larry Clark, in *CCE* the guns are catapults,
the cars are pushbikes and assault is a wedgie
or Chinese burn. Rockstar has never released a
more good-natured product; the characters are
well-worn stereotypes, the humour is broad, and
an atmosphere of goofy wellbeing hangs over
the game from the first moment to the last.

As in *GTA*, access to Bullworth and the surrounding town is staggered. The game is split into five sections comprising one school year, with each section devoted to winning favour with a new clique and allowing you to explore a new area of the map. There are the usual array of shops and services at your disposal – haircuts, fashion, groceries – some integral to your progress, some mere decoration. *CCE* isn't a game of overwhelming ambition – as *San Andreas* sometimes was – and your environment reflects this. Perhaps it is the absence of fast



#### PERSUASION? Flowers and chocolate do the trick.

#### Q. ANY SIDE EFFECTS?

A health boost should you get it right, a knee in the nuts if not.





floor to put your pursuers on

their hacksides

MISSING LINK

Buy a girl some flowers and you might get a kiss... or a knee in the groin.

vehicles, perhaps it is that the town doesn't live in the way that San Andreas or Vice City did, but there is an unusual absence of that desire to just forsake the task at hand and explore. This is an altogether more focused game, an aspect that complements the lightness of the material.

This lack of desire to probe is also testament to the quality of the story missions. Rockstar has imagined hundreds of scenarios for the GTA universe, and even the staunchest of supporters would admit that, at times, there was a tendency toward repetition. This is a facet inherent in the design; mission variety will always be limited by the core gameplay mechanics, it's the little twists applied to the formula that bring a feeling of freshness.

The schoolyard setting affords Rockstar a whole new palette. Where once you might have been assassinating a mob boss while avoiding his marauding cronies, now you're dodging the tackles of football players while firing a catapult at the team mascot. At one time you might have been ramming a drug dealer's car off the road in a hail of bullets, but now you're chasing a thieving nerd on your bike, pelting him with rotten eggs. The curious predilection of the open world for gratuitous violence has aged the concept prematurely; CCE is a shining example of how well it can work with a little invention.

There are flaws to the scholastic proceedings. The side missions do feel like just that, and it's tough to muster the energy to mow a lawn, take a paper round or compete in yet another bike race for a few bucks when progress through story mode is so rapid and satisfying. There are supposedly 15 hours of gameplay here, and though we would argue that it was slightly more, an accomplished gamer would find few reasons to repeat a mission until at least halfway through CCE's entertaining tale. It is a brief experience, and one that ultimately feels inconsequential, but Rockstar's gift for salty humour and broad characterisation is ideally suited to the playground. Not only is this its finest game outside GTA, it's arguably the best open-world game since too. It was only ever going to be Rockstar, and praise be for that.

> **VERDICT** LIGHT, BRIEF AND NEAR IMPOSSIBLE NOT

#### A CLASS ACT

Lessons are cunningly integrated into the gameplay. Each class takes the form of a mini-game split into five increasingly difficult sections; passing them will reward your character with useful attributes, fail and you must wait to try again. For example, English is an anagram game that'll improve your ability to give excuses when caught; Art is a rehash of Qix, and will grant you a health boost when you kiss a girl; Chemistry is a rhythm-response task and leaves you with the knowledge to make stink bombs, itching powder and other instruments of mischief. You can play truant of course, but it's to Rockstar's credit that Canis Canem Edit makes skipping class the less attractive option.



Swap transistors with the hobo that lives behind the school for some free fighting lessons



Jimmy can slide down any banister he comes across. Very useful for making a getaway.

#### REVIEW GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2 XBOX 360/MULTIFORMAT



# GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

UBISOFT'S STELLAR SHOOTER RETURNS TO MEXICO



OTHER FORMATS PlayStation 3,

PlayStation Portable,

**ORIGIN** France

**PUBLISHER** Ubisoft

DEVELOPER

In-House PRICE

£49.99

**RELEASE** 

9 March 2007

**PLAYERS** 

how to approach a sequel. It's imperative to implement some changes to keep things fresh, but at the same time, moving too far away from the original will alienate a large proportion of the fan base. It is a conundrum like no other, and the decision becomes increasingly more difficult when the follow-up is

t's always a challenge to determine

trying to outdo what many consider to be the Game Of 2006. When Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter debuted in March of last year it was heralded as the first 'real' next-generation title. The graphics were awe inspiring, the gameplay was solid and it left everyone who played it in high sprits regarding their £279 investment. There was never any doubt that the series would continue but exactly how Ubisoft would push the next instalment was indeed a mystery. To be blunt, it's managed to take it up a notch by hardly altering its style at all.

There's no denying that GRAW2 is a sequel in every sense of the word, but the tweaks and finetuning that have taken place are more than enough

to draw you back into the Ghosts' universe. The Cross-Com is now far more robust and versatile than before; being able to switch to a full-screen view of any ally, be it human or machine, assists in forming a solid strategy no end. The new dynamic weather system is also a pleasant addition. Not knowing how the conditions will transpire on the ground means missions can feel varied. It never requires a significant alteration of tactics – even when the weather shifts from beautiful sunshine to torrential rain - but it allows the realism the game so desperately craves to have some credibility. However, it's the sheer epic nature of the singleplayer campaign that will leave you craving more.

Despite continuing to rely on slow pace and tactical initiative, GRAW2 is able to pile up the action to an impressive degree. Mexican rogues and mercenaries co-operate with a startling amount of intelligence, and certain shoot-outs take a substantial period to get through - the majority of which continually ask for a tremendous showing of skill and tact. It's almost as if GRAW2 is GRAW's older brother - wiser, tougher, and equipped with just the right serving of attitude. The exaggerated dialogue is highly clichéd and delivered with such enthusiasm and haste that it's hard not to feel like something of a hero. Reinforcing this theme is the truly grand musical score that crescendos when events get serious, and completely disappears when they're calm. It hasn't radically altered from Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter but is used far better and with greater effect.

Unfortunately, the single-player suffers slightly due to how short the campaign is. Experienced

#### Q. IS THERE ENOUGH NEW CONTENT?

Definitely. The single-player campaign is brand new and the online options will keep you busy for a while.

#### Q. BUT IT LOOKS ALMOST IDENTICAL

Well, it is set in Mexico again but the environment is varied enough to make events seem fresh

#### Q. ANY NEW CLASSES?

Yes. You can now choose to take along a medic who carries a specific number of health packs – just don't run out of them.





GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER



■ The new medic class fits into GRAW's universe very nicely.





players will be able to breeze through it in little over a day while those new to the franchise, who decide to play through on a lower difficulty (as is probable), will find barely any obstructions to block their path. Thankfully, due to its intensity, there are enough reasons to venture back through. Whether that comes down to the desire to complete it on a higher difficulty level, to improve statistics, or simply as a result of the urge to get caught up in the whole ordeal once more, it's highly doubtful anyone will have had enough after initially sitting through it. Furthermore, the single missions that are unlocked after successfully tackling them in the campaign offer a great deal of longevity. Developers clearly realise the appeal that Xbox Live has beyond that of straightforward multiplayer gaming, in particular the state of leader boards. With that in mind, it comes as little or no surprise that every move and shot made in a solitary assignment is recorded. It's not incredibly innovative but it sure is welcome nonetheless.

Despite all this, it's hard to find an excuse for the poor job that's been carried out with Scott Mitchell's Al team-mates. Although they are not as frustrating as before, they still have a tendency to stand directly in the line of fire even when repeatedly telling them to regroup. Fortunately, all members turn it up a notch when on the offensive,



BANNED IN

■ The smoke effects and explosions are still a wonder to behold.

but as soon as bullets start to fly it's likely they'll return to their old tricks.

As important as it is to repel Mexican forces, it's the multiplayer side of things upon which Ubisoft has really focused on this occasion. With more co-op missions, maps and the ability to set up and join clans, it has the potential to become the Live game of choice for quite a stretch. It's disappointing that the 16-player limit hasn't been altered – team elimination matches with 32 combatants would have been extreme to say the least – but this omission by no means stops the promise multiplayer has.

It was always unlikely that *GRAW2* would carry the same impact as its predecessor last year, mainly due to the fact that its graphics and approach do look exceedingly similar. Beneath the surface, though, it has done more than enough to prove itself. Anyone with a sharp enough eye will notice how attractive it is and how well it plays out; at a push, it may even be the better game. It's plain to see that *GRAW2* will appeal to the same type of gamer as it always has, nevertheless, those who fit into this category are free to start the celebrations. *Ghost Recon* continues to be a triumph, and for that reason alone we should all be exceedingly pleased.

VERDICT 8/10
360 IS THE PLACE FOR EXCELLENT TACTICAL SHOOTERS

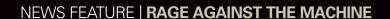
#### **CHARACTERISATION**

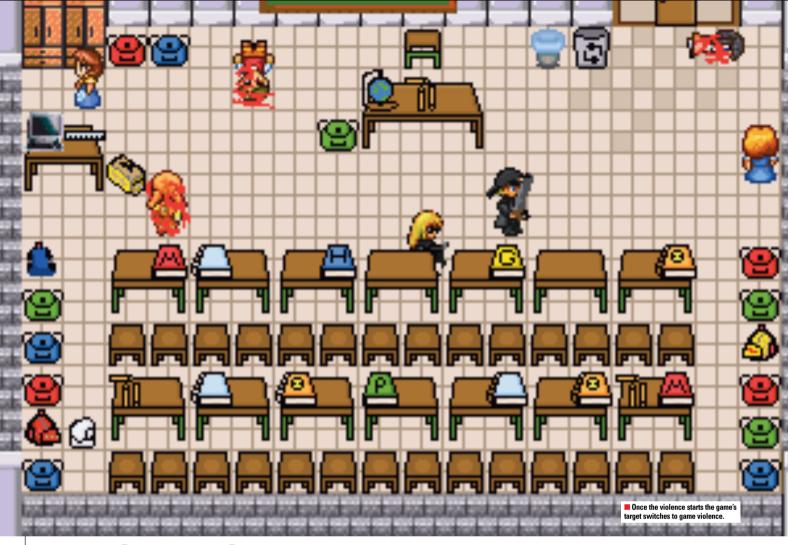
Scott Mitchell was no more than a face in 2006, so it's surprising to see him so vivacious here. Always ready to make a hackneyed quip or utter an atrocious one-liner, he's developed quite the personality and is all the better for it. True, many will find this out of place considering *GRAW*'s solemn tone, but it adds a sense of flippancy to what's essentially a very serious game. As long as Ubisoft can contain itself when the inevitable sequel rolls around, it'll be a nice novelty that injects a solid dose of much needed personality.



Yes, the Ghosts are back in Mexico but Ubisoft has done a fair job in varying the environments.







### RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

DANNY LEDONNE'S SUPER COLUMBINE MASSACRE RPG! HAS BEEN CONTROVERSIAL SINCE THE SECOND IT WAS RELEASED. GAMES™ TALKS TO ITS CREATOR ABOUT VIOLENCE, VEHEMENCE AND VINDICATION...

iving in a world wracked with problems can blunt your reaction to tragedy. Global warming, religious insurgence, genocidal dictators, capitalist exploitation - it reads like a recipe for disaster, defining the atmosphere of the society in which we live, and as disturbing as it is to admit, life on Earth is almost unthinkable without them. Despite the prevalence of inequality and suffering in the modern world, tragedies like the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999 still catch us off guard. The problems above are gigantic issues, some of which are centuries old, but schoolyard rampages are a more intimate phenomenon, particular to the last 50 years. They involve children killing children, and represent a terrifying prospect - the death of innocence.

The Columbine massacre was quickly attributed to youth culture: Marilyn Manson,

Doom, The Matrix, entities that parents had no control over, providing enough scapegoats for older generations to feel they were blameless for the fate of those kids. But Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold didn't gun down 12 of their classmates because death metal or a videogame told them to; they did it out of rage at the state of the world around them, the existence of which was only made possible by the wilful ignorance of previous generations. If you're in your twenties now – as Harris and Klebold would be – you're part of the first generation since the Second World War to inherit a worse planet and quality of life than those before them. Somebody dropped the ball, and it wasn't Marilyn Manson.

Danny Ledonne released *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* as a free download in 2005, and it's been a talking point ever since. Never mind that

few of its critics had ever played it, never mind that other media have produced admirable, enlightening dissections of tragic events (Paul Greengrass's United 93, Gus Van Sant's Elephant), this was a videogame, and for many that immediately qualified it as unworthy. The dispute flared up again recently when SCMRPG! was kicked out of this year's Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition due to loss of sponsors, despite Ledonne originally being courted by the event's organisers and persuaded to go back on his decision not to enter. Ledonne was admirably civil about the decision, saying: "I don't want to paint [Slamdance] as the villain in this. I don't think the real issue is a couple of guys who decided to reject my game; it's the larger pressures placed on them."

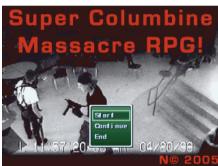
The wider reaction, however, has been much more vitriolic. There was an inevitable cheer

#### >> NEWS FEATURE | RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE



'You guys sure are dressed funny. A ren'i you with, like, the Trench Cost Mafia or something? Why are you out of class, anyway?'

■ The massacre is preceded by a stealth section where the player must avoid CCTV cameras and hall monitors to plant bombs in the cafeteria.



The game uses images of the tragedy sparingly and effectively.





I just wanted to epologize to you guys for any crep. To everyone I love, I'm really sorry about all this.

■ SCMRPG's goal is to provide the killers with a human face.

#### "COLUMBINE WAS A WAY FOR ME TO CONFRONT THE SAME DEPRESSION AND ANGER IN MY LIFE THAT ERIC AND DYLAN EXPRESSED. I WANT MY GAME TO BE A WAY FOR SOCIETY TO TAKE A LOOK IN THE MIRROR"

from the right-wing and mainstream press, but the game development community has been eager to voice its disappointment. N'Gai Croal, Newsweek's influential games correspondent, wrote an article slamming the festival for showing films on controversial subjects but discriminating against videogames trying to do the same thing. "Simply put," wrote Croal, "the average person believes videogames are solely intended for kids; that the content of games is suitable for kids; and if it isn't, it darned well should be, even if it has an 'M' rating. And while we certainly recognise that many will see SCMRPG! as ghoulish, offensive and trivialising of a horrific event, we reject the premise that it is inherently so. For those of us who care about the future of videogames, this is a time to stand up and be counted."

Three days later that is just what the other finalists did, sending an open letter to the

Slamdance organisers (see Open Letter To Slamdance) asking for *SCMRPG!* to be reinstated. Since then, more than half of the finalists have withdrawn from the competition in protest, determined to prove that they should be treated with the same respect as any other artist. With the game industry still struggling to be taken seriously, in the future this could be seen as a watershed moment.

Behind the righteous anger, the gushing praise, the Slamdance debacle, and more than 300,000 downloads is Danny Ledonne, a 24-year-old graduate from Emerson College's film course in Boston, Massachusetts. Choosing at first to remain anonymous, Ledonne went under the sobriquet 'Columbin' before the intense controversy forced him to enter the debate to better defend his position. Far from the callous manipulator many have portrayed him to be,



Doom was widely cited as a 'cause' of the tragedy.

## OPEN LETTER TO SLAMDANCE

#### Ledonne's Fellow Finalists Issued The Following Response At His Withdrawal

Dear Slamdance festival organisers,

In recent years, the Slamdance Film Festival has become a major gathering for independent gamemakers... in a context where our work was seen as legitimate, artistic, and meaningful. Recently, the festival has made the decision to remove one of the finalists, Super Columbine Massacre RPGI, by Danny Ledonne, from the competition – after this game was solicited by festival organisers, chosen by a jury, and publicised as a finalist. We have been unable to find mention of any other film, game, or screenplay that has been pulled from Slamdance at any point in the past, making this an unfortunate first for the festival.

We object to this decision and strongly urge the festival organisers to reinstate the game. It is legitimate for games to take on difficult topics and to challenge conventional ideas about what video games can do. No game should be rejected for moral or other reasons after a panel of judges has found the game to be of artistic merit and worthy of inclusion in the festival. We find it very unlikely that a similar decision would have been made about a jury-selected film, and see this as hurting the legitimacy of games as a form of expression, exploration, and experience.

In November, we were very pleased to read this statement from Peter Baxter, the president of Slamdance, in a press release: "Video games today are as important and influential as movies have ever been. The type and standard of creativity we are seeing at Slamdance Games is akin to the trailblazing days of independent filmmaking, a time that artists reacted with more imagination and against the generic fare of the movie studio."

We believe that reinstating Ledonne's game is highly consistent with supporting trailblazing game making. Keeping the game out of the festival would suggest that games are for kids, that they are for amusement only and cannot deal with matters of importance, and that decisions about a game's artistic merit are not as valid as [those of] a film. Please, for the sake of the Guerilla Gamemaker Competition and the work the festival has already done in support of games, offer to restore the original slate of finalists.

Sincerely,
Nick Montfort – Book And Volume
Jonathan Blow – Braid
Jason Rohrer – Cultivation
John Baez, Tom Full, Dan Paladin – Castle Crashers
Jenova Chet, Kellie Santiago – flOw
Colin Fletcher, Ryan Thom – Steam Brigade
Jonathan Mak – Everyday Shooter

#### NEWS FEATURE I RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE



#### **MIXED REVIEWS**

#### **Sample Reactions To Super Columbine Massacre RPG!**

Opposable Thumbs

"I left the game feeling shaken and disturbed

about Columbine once again, but this is a videogame that's bound to be misunderstood, and the people who are most likely to gain anything from it will never play it."

#### Man!festogames "It is a work of serious artistic

intent and accomplishment, based on considerable research that, in fact, illuminates and reflects the horror of that day. Just as there are novels of the Holocaust. there can be a game of Columbine, and neither need trivialise a tragedy."



"The purpose of this game is not to celebrate the events at Columbine, but to attempt to represent them from the perspective of the perpetrators. This is a worthwhile effort, and one truly unique to

videogames as a medium."

#### **Alternative Games**

"This may not be the future of gaming, but it

is a step towards the future of how games will be treated and viewed in our culture as artful, meaningful objects that represent the thoughts, ideas, dreams and nightmares of a unique creator."



"Our inventor is a pompous hypocrite and a coward. Contrary to his claims, he is affected enough by a self-preservation streak that he insists on hiding behind the veil of anonymity."

#### denverpost.com "The fact that someone

created such a

game, and that some 10,000 people already have downloaded it and played it, is sad commentary about what passes for humanity these days."

Ledonne is a part of the generation to which Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold belonged, and the tragedy resonated on a deeply personal level. "When the shooting first occurred, there was certainly that 'it can happen anywhere, it can happen here' feel," Ledonne recalls. "But for me there was also a lingering premonition: 'Could I shoot up my school?' Columbine was a way for me to confront the same depression and anger in my life that Eric and Dylan expressed. Just as I want my videogame to be a way for society to take a look in the mirror, the event itself forced me to do the same."

long-planned, highly intricate act of revenge - not against specific kids but rather the entire world. This is much the same in a majority of school shootings: a lack of real community and self worth. My goal was to release the game and see what kind of conversations it started, which is why it is available for free and why I created a forum for users to talk about it. The goal was never to be famous or make money."

Ledonne's choice to remain anonymous allowed the press ample opportunity to speculate on his true motives, with many seizing upon the word 'Super' in the game's title as evidence of its

#### "I released the game **to see what conversations it** STARTED, WHICH IS WHY IT IS AVAILABLE FOR FREE AND WHY I CREATED A FORUM FOR USERS TO TALK ABOUT IT. THE GOAL WAS NEVER TO BE FAMOUS OR MAKE MONEY"

Such sentiments echoed across an entire generation of teenagers, one of the few social groups to sympathise with two young boys that the media would portray to be at once demonic and the helpless victims of demonic media persuasion. "I found much of the press coverage to be frustrating and misleading," Ledonne comments. "Eric and Dylan didn't like Marilyn Manson, They weren't homosexual lovers, They weren't Neo-Nazis. They didn't belong to the Trench Coat Mafia group at their school. Many of the victims played the same videogames the killers did. The press latched onto whatever scapegoats they could find. Hard journalism took a back seat to reactionary sensationalism. If you want to understand why someone kills, the task runs far deeper than surveying their collection of films, videogames, and CDs. Why not read what they put in their diaries? Why not read what they've written in class? That's what I did for this game. The chief causes of the Columbine shooting, I believe, were the anger and isolation over years and years that finally erupted in a

exploitative purpose. The name, Ledonne argues, was intended to be ironic, a statement on the videogame industry's tradition of commodifying horrific acts of violence. "Frankly it seemed to be a strong starting point for criticising the game industry," Ledonne continues. "One that markets itself as something cheap and infantile. If games are ever going to be something more than children's toys, the industry and the public have a way to go toward thinking of videogames



Pipe bombs and napalm are also available in your inventory.

#### NEWS FEATURE | RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE



You found a Marilyn Manson CD The lyrics are sure to inspire impulsive aggression and rage... Eric fires off a shotgun blast! Nerdy Girl 43 damage

Game conventions are exploited to pass comment on their use of violence.



■ The cafeteria bombs were faulty and didn't explode.

as literary and therefore capable of commentary, satire, tragedy, and analysis." The misconception made by Super Columbine Massacre RPG!'s opponents, however, is perfectly understandable. Danny Ledonne is exploring subject matter that requires highly sophisticated satire to remain tasteful - a standard that the game doesn't always maintain - though Ledonne insists he was very wary of the game appearing to be a eulogy to the massacre: "I decided that I really felt uncomfortable including the names and likenesses of the actual victims, because then the purpose of the game would seem to be killing specific kids instead of understanding the larger context for why they did it. Conversely, I had to include some photos of the event. I didn't want this game to be an abstraction. Despite the simple graphics, I wanted the game to force the player to acknowledge that real people really died - that this isn't just a game."

For a media that was all too ready to blame the tragedy on Marilyn Manson and *Doom*, Ledonne's game seemed the next link in a chain of exploitation – art imitating life imitating art – and to a degree this is quite understandable. Despite any claims to maturity the industry is currently making, videogames have traditionally been marketed as lightweight, fun and, very often, for children. This has left the wider public with the belief that the medium simply isn't

capable of dealing with weighty subject matter. It is a double standard, but to an extent the industry has been an architect of the prejudice used against it. In that respect, games like SCMRPG! share a similar spirit to that of punk, conveying a dissonant message while also taking aim at the banality of the industry that made them possible. "Videogames have seldom criticised themselves, and one of the main functions of mine was to lampoon the conventions of gaming with a subject that games haven't touched." Ledonne explains. "Equip the Marilyn Manson CD onto Eric and his attack points increase. Sneak around the hallway like Solid Snake to plant the bombs in the cafeteria. Aside from the Columbine shooting itself, this is a game that's about gaming: about what it has been limited to and perhaps why."

Super Columbine was always going to attract criticism - an inevitable side effect of giving a human face to people we're told to see as monsters - but whatever your opinion on the execution of SCMRPG!, it represents something utterly vital to the progression of videogames from media product to art form; the capacity to be a platform for debate, the acceptance that games don't actually have to be fun. The Wii might increase the audience size, but it is only likely to regress the medium's credibility. "I think there are many subjects that videogames can explore in new ways," Ledonne offers. "In fact, I don't think there is any subject that should be 'off limits' for a game in so much as a film or a book can be about those same topics. Otherwise, games are already dead in the water; relegated to quarter-munching entertainment that asks nothing of us beyond hand-eye co-ordination. The mainstream reaction was disappointing and predictable. 'There's a game about that! How could it be?' Never mind what it's saying or how it's saying it; the press still typecasts videogames as being innocuous and thus when a game focuses on a real-world event they're appalled. Maybe in ten years this will be different. We'll see."

## CRYSIS? WHAT CRYSIS?

#### Controversy Over Game Violence Reaches Fever Pitch

The German states of Bavaria and Lower Saxony are attempting to push through legislation that would punish cruel violence in videogames with up to a year in prison. The move was made in response to a shooting in the town of Emsdetten, where Sebastian Bosse, an 18-year-old *Counter-Strike* fan, wounded dozens of students in his former school before shooting himself. The Bavarian Interior Minister, Günter Beckstein, commented: "It is beyond any doubt that such killer games desensitise unstable characters and can have a stimulating effect." Crytek, the Frankfurt-based developer of *Crysis*, has threatened to move the 130-strong company out of the country if the proposal is passed.

Both *Dead Rising* and *Gears Of War* have been banned in Germany despite meeting very little resistance in other territories, and considering that the country represents a quarter of all European sales and is home to a significant development community, that's worrying news. *Rule Of Rose* suffered a similar fate at the hands of the British and Italian press, after several newspapers published false reports on the game's content. Such action makes the assumption that videogames are the only forces in society that can lead to a young person feeling oppressed, trapped or isolated – effects commonly associated with capitalism. It is a matter of great shame that such willfully ignorant opinion can thrive in countries that take pride in their own sense of democracy.



Germany has taken a dim view of violent games like Gears Of War.



Here's the Colossus of Rhodes living up to his name. He is kind of large and badass.



# **GOD OF WAR II**

HE'S BACK, AND HE'S BETTER THAN ANYONE IMAGINED



n an industry obsessed with the new, it's gratifying to witness this wonderful renaissance the PS2 is currently enjoying. While many

developers toil fruitlessly on soulless high-definition exploits, spectacularly failing to hit the heights of Gears and MotorStorm, Sony's most precious piece of kit is signing out in fine style. It all started with Canus Canem Edit - the first truly unique freeroamer since GTA, and the little black box of magic hasn't looked back since. This year has already seen the breathtakingly beautiful Okami and exquisite Final Fantasy XII decorate the PAL territories, and now as we hit the month where the most important console sequel of all time finally arrives, perhaps the finest gaming sequel in history is set to make PS3 feel a little underwhelming.

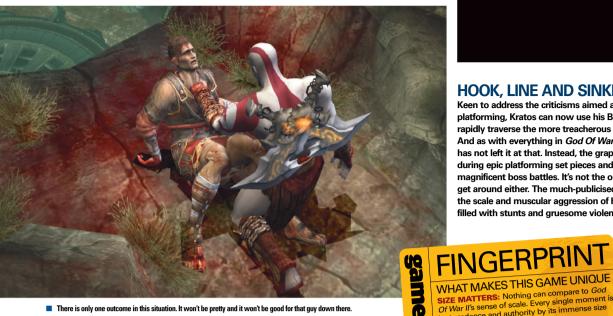
With God Of War II, the team at Sony's Santa Monica outfit has created a masterpiece. This is action gaming at its absolute finest; an immaculate, endlessly exhilarating ride through 15 hours of wonder. This is why the entertainment medium we share is so cherished by its disciples - God Of War II is a work of art. While the debates about gaming's critical worth continue to rage, one

simple fact remains - no other media can deliver such a rush, such a sense of awe, of satisfaction, of raw adrenaline. If that sort of emotional response is not worthy of art, then what is?

It all starts with the magnificent Colossus. If ever a game has set its stall out so emphatically, games™ is yet to play it. An ostentatious middle finger to the genre staple – the training mission - God Of War II's opening is as magnificent as it is ambitious. The now immortal Kratos, newly crowned God of War and deliverer of endless brutality and ultra violence, descends upon the city of Rhodes to duel with this incredible



The scale and scope is unbelievable - everything feels like it is of



#### HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

Keen to address the criticisms aimed at the original's clumsy platforming, Kratos can now use his Blades as a grappling hook to rapidly traverse the more treacherous parts of the environment. And as with everything in God Of War II, Sony Santa Monica has not left it at that. Instead, the grappling is used in puzzles, during epic platforming set pieces and of course, as a part of the magnificent boss battles. It's not the only new way for Kratos to get around either. The much-publicised Pegasus sections maintain the scale and muscular aggression of Kratos' on-foot escapades, filled with stunts and gruesome violence. Just like it should be.

■ There is only one outcome in this situation. It won't be pretty and it won't be good for that guy down there.



The Blades of Athena are as devastating as ever,

allowing for fast, fluid, never-ending combos.

man-made beast, and the ensuing city-spanning conflict is as astonishing a boss battle as one could ever hope to see. A dazzling blend of QTE and traditional pattern-based action with a searing finish and an ingenious twist, not only do God Of War II's opening 40 minutes out-do the original's genre-redefining Hydra fight, they eclipse most entire games.

The concern with such an ostentatious opening is that the remaining 14 hours cannot compete. While it's true that no single part of God Of War II ever truly reaches the dizzy heights of that opening assault on the senses, the faultless pacing and onslaught of unforgettable moments more than make up for it. This is what action gaming is all about - moments. Moments that make your jaw drop, moments that make you applaud, make you want to celebrate the very fact you're playing the game, that make you celebrate the fact you play games full stop. Not even the sublime Twilight Princess can boast as many scenes and set pieces that make you stare at the screen in wide-eyed wonder. In fact, hardly anything can.

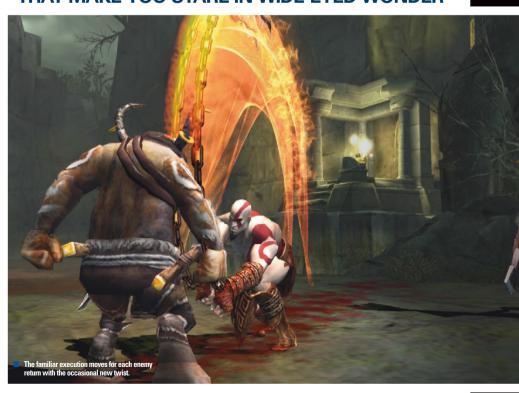
It all comes back to that most crucial of design techniques - pace. A staple of great cinema and literature, pacing is all-too-frequently absent from videogame design. Developers are often too keen to throw all their punches in the first round and fill out the remainder with difficulty spikes and identikit warehouses. Not God Of War. Cory Barlog



■ The opening battle with the Colossus will go down as one of the finest bosses in history.



# "NOT EVEN THE SUBLIME TWILIGHT PRINCESS CAN BOAST AS MANY SCENES AND SET PIECES THAT MAKE YOU STARE IN WIDE-EYED WONDER"



## REVIEW | GOD OF WAR II | PLAYSTATION 2



We don't fancy this guy's chances

 he's already resigned himself to
 a bloody death.

and his team are students of the game – they understand the importance of peaks and troughs, of down-time and of sensation, and there's no finer example than *God Of War II*. Every second you worry Kratos' adventure is taking a turn for the mundane, the game throws an incredible, imaginative piece of scenery or enemy or ingenious puzzle at you. And it doesn't stop until the thrilling final scene. Far be it from us to ruin what is an experience littered with show-stealing set-pieces, but suffice to say, everything that was so memorable from *God Of War* is amplified

## "AN ASTONISHINGLY EVOCATIVE, UNSTOPPABLY ALLURING VOYAGE THROUGH MYTH AND MAJESTY, THE LIKES OF WHICH WE RARELY SEE"

exponentially here. And remember, this is all running on 'ageing' PlayStation 2 hardware. What an achievement.

Again, God Of War's lead makes for one of the most engaging protagonists to ever grace a videogame. While he may lack the subtlety of Gordon Freeman or the silent grace of Link, his overtly masculine charm is inescapable. And it's all so deliberate in Kratos' world – his

Kratos versus horse? Only one winner. Kratos versus anything? Only one winner.





It's hard to believe God Of War II runs on PS2, such is the beauty of its art design.

personality spills over into the very minutiae of the experience. Just as before, every single action this thunderously violent being takes is executed with such weight, such force and such deliberation as to reinforce his unquestionable power. Be it tearing the head off a Gorgon, hurling half a temple into a swamp or plunging a spear through the head of a helpless enemy, Kratos' every motion is a joy to behold. It reflects the bloodiness and violence of the time - Greek mythology is defined by its brutality, and Kratos' single mindedness and incessancy on revenge fits the subject matter ideally. Amazingly - and this is still rare for gaming - God Of War II genuinely makes you care what happens next. If only we could say that more often.

Of course, the expertly told story and marvellous pacing would still be redundant if the game's core was sub par. Unsurprisingly, given the love pouring from these pages, God Of War II's combat is magnificent. A subtle improvement over the original's stylish, fluid, flowing combos, Kratos delivers death in a manner only matched by Dante. Accusations of GOW focusing on button mashing are off the mark - the new parrying system that allows projectiles to be absorbed and flung back to their source demands split-second timing, and the later stages throw enemies at you from all angles and simply expect you to be able to cope. God Of War II may not require the dedication and mastery of Ninja Gaiden or Devil May Cry, but it's every bit as satisfying.

#### Q. HOW MANY WEAPONS?

Four in total, although the Blades of Athena will always be your best friend

## Q. WHAT IS THE MUSIC LIKE?

Superb, epic, bombastic and consistently thrilling.

**Q. AND THE STORY?** Almost as good as the original's, about a thousand times better than most

#### **BIG BOSS MAN**

Where God Of War only featured a few boss encounters, the sequel ups the ante considerably by hurling huge set-piece battles, sporadic battles with mythical monsters and even a handful of human opponents throughout the game. Plundering myth as only Sony Santa Monica can, you'll face a selection of 'names' from Ancient Greek history, including Perseus, Prometheus and Euralyes, all of which stand in Kratos' way and seek to halt his unrepentant march toward revenge. And the results? Bloody, violent death. Every time. There are few myths left for the God Of War team to source for the inevitable sequel – we shall see what happens next, although the superb ending certainly offers a sizeable suggestion.



#### **TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS**

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM



Okay, so you are knee-deep in the Colossus of Rhodes your jaw is firmly positioned on the floor and God Of even begun.



The twist has taken place the pace has dipped by a suitable degree, and you are well on your way to having one hell of an incredible adventure.



THE OF EURYALE

Bool God Of War II may be over, but what a ride it was. Incomparable, And the bounty of extras and difficulty settings will keep you coming back for more.

The sister of Medusa,

the vile Euryales, makes a devastating appearance.



R1

The God of War also holds the title of King of the Swingers.

God Of War II's finest achievement though, is not its combat, its story or its set pieces, but its seamlessness. Through skill, determination, vision and a sizeable budget, Sony Santa Monica has created a videogame that transcends typical criticism, a game that if simply analysed by its component parts would not be done justice. This is what the modern single-player videogame strives to be, a linear journey from beginning to end, a tale told with impeccable skill and panache, a milestone. God Of War II is now the benchmark for single mindedness. Where others may - and often successfully - look to expand our play through emergent worlds and endless possibility, God Of War II shows how successful and impactful gaming can be when it remains focused on one objective. And when that game is God Of War, that objective is to amaze.

If there's one criticism that can be laid at Kratos' blood-stained shoes it's familiarity. Despite its magnificence, God Of War II shares so much with its predecessor that it could never be considered truly groundbreaking. So how can it be awarded the score that sits at the bottom of this page? By that reasoning, no sequel can

ever receive a double-figured score, a theory that is unfair - it's broken criticism. As a standalone piece of entertainment, God Of War II walks proud with a select few, staring down on the competition from the peak of Olympus, pitching a flag and saying 'come and beat me.'

Where the original laid the groundwork (and did so in spectacular style), God Of War II delivers on its every promise. Unlike the first game, there's no lacklustre last hour, no spiky pits of Hades or joyless cliff climbs. There's no disappointment,

superb console, how fitting it is that Sony delivers its final and finest offering. An extraordinary game on an extraordinary machine, and a most deserved recipient of a games™ ten. Now is the time of the God of War.

VERDICT 10/10
THE BEST GAME ON PS2. IT'S AS SIMPLE AS THAT



AS GOOD AS **RESIDENT EVIL 4** 

no 'what could have been.' This is a game that keeps on giving, an astonishingly evocative, unstoppably alluring voyage through myth and majesty, a story the likes of which we rarely see. A benchmark. So, as we begin to plan our eulogies for a truly

# **MANHUNT 2**

THE HORROR... THE HORROR...





PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable ORIGIN

PUBLISHER Rockstar

DEVELOPER In-House

PRICE

£39.99 RELEASE

31 October 2008

**PLAYERS** 

hat is the correct way to react when the videogame you've been diligently scrutinising for 15 hours is denied a certificate

by the BBFC, effectively preventing it from being released in the UK? This is the problem that Rockstar is currently wrestling with. A mere three weeks before the sequel to Manhunt is due to hit the shelves, the game has been placed on hiatus, and will very likely be placed back into development to satiate the demands of the censors. Granted, Rockstar's towering, financially resplendent empire has been significantly aided by the controversy surrounding its games in the past, but the last title to be outright refused a certificate in the United Kingdom was Carmageddon in 1997. Evidently, nothing since has pushed the boundaries of taste far enough, not even Manhunt 2's hugely controversial predecessor.

A simple cosmetic touch was all that Carmageddon required to clear its path to the high-street shelves – the zombies' blood colour was changed from red to green – but Manhunt 2 has no such easy escape route. The violence, and there is plenty, is based in a gritty, nihilistic reality. Your victims bleed red because they are human. Just like its progenitor, violence is so central to your character's success that it is difficult to imagine where any simple but significant changes could be made. This isn't a matter of trimming a shot or cutting a scene; pain and discomfort saturates every moment of the experience.

Indeed, it could be argued that this is entirely the point. *Manhunt 2* is a horror game and the abiding atmosphere of decay and malaise is testament to the skill of all those involved. The grimy, shadow-flecked environments, the brilliantly atmospheric sound, the menagerie of homicidal gimps, hicks and freaks – this is expert design work, and the cumulative effect is one of skincrawling intensity.

The storyline is also a vast improvement on the wisp of narrative that underscored the original game. Where James Earl Cash and snuff movies seemed like ciphers providing a clear path to the violence, Daniel Lamb's struggle to recover his memory and his past is deeply entrenched in emotional turmoil, and a more logical extension of the character. In terms of narrative and overall execution, *Manhunt 2* is certainly a more mature effort and represents a significant enhancement over the original in all but one respect: the violence.

# FAOs O. ARE EXECUTIONS THE SAME?

Largely. The severity varies depending on how long you hold the A-button.

#### Q. ANY NOTABLE NEW WEAPONS?

The cattle prod is pretty explosive and the razor wire is put to hideous use.

#### O. DOES IT DESERVE TO BE BANNED?

Not at all, but that's just our humble opinion.





SPLINTER CEL



The severity of your executions throughout the game will dictate which one of two final levels you will play.



The improved plot means that the excessive violence jars with the



 One level is set in an underground S&M club and is hugely reminiscent of Fli Roth's Hostel



The predicament Cash was placed in provided a coherent reason to pursue increasingly brutal executions, and was a satisfactory, if somewhat contrived, explanation for the inclusion of 'Style Points' to rate the barbarity of your performance. *Manhunt 2*, however, places you in control of a man fighting against his homicidal tendencies as he tries to reclaim his identity. In this context the steadily escalating brutality lacks a clear motivation, resulting in the Style Points working directly against the underlying themes of the narrative, and making it all but impossible for Rockstar to deny that the game glorifies its violent content.

Traditionally the role of the sequel is to provide more, but the extra depth and focus given to the narrative would have been better complemented by greater restraint and a more cerebral approach to the violence. Rather than providing the knockout punch they are intended to give, the comic extremity of the executions tends to diffuse



the tension the game so effectively manages to build. Personal views on the necessity of such violence are neither here nor there; this is a matter of tone, and Rockstar seems to have built *Manhunt 2* around imaginative death sequences rather than story.

At the time of writing it seems unlikely that *Manhunt 2* will ever be officially available in the UK – at least not in its current form – and that is an unmitigated shame. The ban will only cloud the issue of whether the game itself is of genuine quality, but this remains precisely the kind of experience that entertainment-starved Wii owners have been waiting for. Expertly crafted, unbearably intense, and ideally suited to motion control, it ticks all the boxes for a console that is still a long way from emerging from its well-publicised drought. If only Rockstar had realised that, in this case, less would certainly have been more.



#### **EXPERT EXECUTION**

That the level of gore would increase for Manhunt 2 was inevitable. Sequels up the ante by their very nature, and given that gruesome death is such an integral gameplay element, Rockstar was unlikely to omit the blood. Where this game goes the extra mile is in context. Each gun now has a unique execution while enemies unwittingly strolling beneath you can fall victim to the range of new 'Jump Executions'. More interesting, though, were the environmental executions which allow you to utilise ambient details in the level to kill your enemies – we surprised an enemy standing next to industrial machinery and pushed him in; we plunged another poor fool's head into a vat of liquid nitrogen. Fun for all the family.







 As much as we'd love to tell you otherwise, in the Manhunt sequel you cannot actually levitate.



The game is very well designed, and the mix of stealth and gung-ho combat keeps it constantly interesting.



 $\blacksquare$  One level allows you to create your own 'Environmental Executions' with a can of gasoline.







and graphic adventures featured nothing but puzzle-solving and interactive dialogue, before being deemed too passive for modern audiences.

Indeed, it was the 32-bit era in particular, along with the decline in variety of the PC market, which marked the nadir for peaceful alternatives. It is only relatively recently that adventure games have returned, as well as the evolution of old game ideas such as Little Computer People into modern titles such as The Sims. With Nintendo's NES-era interest in the mass market only returning with the Wii and DS, the intervening years dominated by violent games aimed at only a core audience could well be seen as the videogame equivalent of the Dark Ages in years to come.

capable of distinguishing between the two realities they inhabit. However, what it also illustrates is just how central violence is to almost all videogames, however innocuous the presentation. Unless it's puzzle-based or a simulation, almost every videogame,

no matter who it's aimed at, features violence as your principal means of interacting with the world. If the old adage that 'violence solves nothing' was literally true, then videogames would consist of nothing but racing sims and *Tetris* clones, and the Mushroom Kingdom would be brimming over with lethargic reptiles.

Few people see this as a problem. Even the nuttiest anti-games campaigner brands only the most explicit titles as sick filth, and blindly ignores the mountains of corpses at the feet of Crash Bandicoot or Ratchet & Clank - Mario and Sonic have blood on their hands, and they know it. Perhaps, then, the ubiquity of violence says more about human nature than it does about the nature of videogames.

"I'd argue that we're conditioned so much to not respond violently to situations that our flight/fight/fuck response is attracted to events in videogames that allow you to just cut loose," says Chris Avellone, creative director at Obsidian Entertainment, and an RPG veteran whose career spans Planescape: Torment and Fallout. "In games, you can punch your boss or throw him out a window rather than meekly sitting there and nodding.

If you gave me the power to shoot red energy bolts from my hands that could hurl cars and people around, with the magical side effect of it causing absolutely no consequences or harm to any living thing, I'd want that power. I'd use it on the freeway every day. Or if you gave me a fully functioning lightsaber and told me that whenever I hit someone with it they would

explode into colourful Lego bricks with a kitchen bell sound, I'd want to do that, too."

There's an intrinsic appeal to consequencefree actions, and videogames provide a perfect environment to scratch that itch. But there's more to this than power fantasies; shooting or punching something are the simplest ways to grant the player a way of interacting with their environment and receiving immediate feedback. In a sense, violence has grown into such an important feature of so many videogames through basic necessity.

"In order to provide a game dynamic, to make it a game, you need to have some sort of system that the player can perform," explains Jens Matthies, creative director of Machinegames, and veteran of The Darkness and The Chronicles Of Riddick. "When you see a dot and you stop it from moving, that's kind of the easiest thing to do and that goes all the way back to Space Invaders. It's not really about killing because it's not dressed up in the way we're used to now. It's the very easiest



game dynamic you can do really. You have something on the screen that is moving and your job is to stop it moving."

"Violence is a very easy way to put meaningful conflict and challenge in games," agrees ex-Maxis developer Chris Hecker. "It's just a simple and clear way to get players involved and interacting and overcoming challenges that matter to them. In more mature art forms, creators can have conflict about everything from pan-galactic war to whether somebody washed their hands after going to the bathroom, but in game design, we really don't know how to design gameplay around more subtle types of conflict yet."

Certainly, that lack of subtlety is no more obvious than in the increasing ranks of games with large, open-world environments, from Grand Theft Auto IV's Liberty City to Assassin's Creed II's Venice. Gamers often complain that these worlds remain stubbornly non-interactive, but the problem is even more pronounced when you accept how few of the available activities revolve around anything other than hurting people – a realisation that can quickly alienate casual gamers who assume the scale and variety of the visuals is echoed by the gameplay.

"I think that is an almost universal reaction to sitting a 'normal' person down in front of a triple-A game right now," says Hecker. "I think this is changing slowly, but until we figure it out, putting a gun in somebody's hand and having an AI start shooting at them is a really quick way to get them involved. However, this kind of conflict is pretty shallow and narrow and gets boring as you get older and want more from your art and entertainment."

"It's also convention," argues Matthies. "In order to have a game people can access easily, you need a system that people don't have to relearn from the beginning. If you want to construct a game around something more complicated, you must also invariably complicate the input and that will instantly alienate a lot of people."

ut some games do find a more even balance of activities, without resorting to darts or bowling minigames. "The best example of an openworld title I've (re)played recently is Fallout 3," says Avellone, who is, admittedly no stranger to the Fallout franchise. "The majority of the time I'm exploring the environment, finding new areas, looking for discoveries in those areas and collecting and organising those discoveries.

"The amount of time I spend fighting in Fallout 3 is almost non-existent and the exploration aspect ends up coming to the forefront - the open world in the game has trained me that there are things to find out there if I'm willing to check around every ridge, explore each turn in the sewer and check the second floors of buildings to see what's up there. More often than not, I'm rewarded with a find or the revelation of another area to explore."





It's the very easiest game dynamic you can do really. You have something on the screen that is moving and your job is to stop it moving Jens Matthies, Machinegames



Of course, designing non-violent tasks that are just as compelling as their more visceral, traditional counterparts isn't easy. Shooting bad guys clearly looks like fun, but although the likes of The Sims or Animal Crossing can make watering plants seem entertaining, it's not the sort of activity that seems appropriate in the average GTA-clone.

"I don't think there's necessarily any relationship between real-world and virtual experiences in terms of being compelling," says Hecker. "This is true in all art and entertainment forms. For example, films or books about incredibly unpleasant things - like divorce or being in prison - can be quite moving and compelling."

t's a valid point, but the kind of activity that can be made to feel compelling in the interactive context of a videogame is far narrower. However pleasant it may be to walk your girlfriend home in real life, or to read a tender account of a character doing so in a novel, the moments in Grand Theft Auto IV where Niko has to do so are rarely talked about as the game's highlights. In complete contrast to the rest of the game there's almost no freedom in how you respond or interact with her.

"The more you have to constrain the player, the less of a game you end up with," reasons Matthies. "If you have a lot of options in a game then there won't be a lot of depth in them. That's the problem, because making a game is incredibly difficult, much harder than a movie where the audience has no input on what happens. An adventure game may have a lot of dialogue options, but you can't enter what you want to say. You're still constrained; it's just the illusion of freedom."

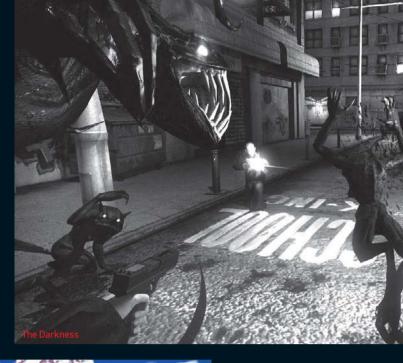
Failing to specialise in a specific area, then, can lead to a failure to attain excellence in any part of the game's design. That's what makes a game like Mass Effect 2 so impressive: as a pure action experience it rivals most dedicated shooters on the market, yet it's still an

expertly written, beautifully voiced story that gives the player a genuine sense of agency. Unfortunately, not all developers have the resources at BioWare's disposal.

"I don't want to say that creating violence is as easy as creating non-violence," says Avellone. "However, once you get a basic combat system established, it's easier to create combat templates. True conversations with others is a complex interaction that's also a special case one - creating new text and recording it each time adds up. For our espionage role-playing game, Alpha Protocol, a large percentage of the game is talking to others and using stealth to move in and out of an area. Getting the feel of combat and artificial intelligence for enemies took at least as much time as writing the script and implementing it into the cinematic dialogue system."

Artifices such as stealth sections and minigames are notoriously controversial in core games, and if used without care can seem less like a welcome variation from the main gameplay and more like a punishment before being allowed to return to it. "I think the right way to look at this is not to focus on making the action itself nonviolent, but instead, ask what kinds of things are we missing," says Hecker. "Even in action-packed films, like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, *Die Hard* or *Aliens*, most of the movie is the characters interacting, solving problems, arguing, struggling, joking, flirting, being scared, and so on.

"The action itself is a relatively small part of the experience; it's used just to punctuate the character interactions and add tension. Measured the same way,







[videogames] fall down badly. If you buy an action game, the entire thing is action except the cut-scenes; our interactivity is missing all the parts that make people care about the action beyond the visceral power fantasy competition aspect."

At Starbreeze, Matthies was responsible for one of the most memorable scenes in *The Darkness* – and of the last few years of game design in general – where the protagonist returns home to watch a film with his girlfriend. There is no complex interactive dialogue, but instead just a quiet mood moment where the only difficult decision is when to get up and stop watching the TV.

"In a movie you have what I call an emotional proxy: characters that don't necessarily move the plot along but which are there for you to empathise with," explains Matthies. "Games never really have this, though. I think of *Max Payne*, where at the beginning of the game his wife and child are murdered. But it just starts off like that and the player has never had the opportunity to interact and bond with them, so they have nothing emotionally invested... That's something we addressed in *The Darkness*. You bond with Jenny and you care about the character, so you feel something when she is attacked. You get enraged because the violation is towards you, and keep playing because you want revenge."

s games begin to plagiarise the look and feel of movies more and more successfully, the problem of action-versusinteraction becomes more pronounced. Nathan Drake from *Uncharted* 

is often compared to Indiana Jones, but Indy hardly ever kills anyone in cold blood – even when they're Nazis. By contrast, in just two games, Nate is responsible for a body count on a par with a small war, and yet we're still supposed to regard him as an essentially likeable, non-aggressive protagonist – a good guy in a bad situation.

"The key difference is that the believability and sympathy come from the non-violent parts of a film, from the breaks between the action where the people are relating to each other," says Hecker. "But, in games, those breaks are usually just cut-scenes, and not as deeply interactive as the action sequences, so they're operating outside the medium in some sense. We don't yet know how to have characters evolve from interactivity in deep and meaningful ways."

"The proudest moment for me in *The Darkness*, in that scene with Jenny on the couch, is her line, 'I have to pee, but I'm too tired to get up'," says Matthies. "That's the type of thing

In game design, we really don't know how to design gameplay around more subtle



you never hear in a game. It's honest. It's a moment you have with someone you're really comfortable with. Creating a moment like that is not any harder than other stuff in a game, it's just trying to use every tool you have to infuse the game with some honest, real relationships."

For many developers, the most common way to allow breathing space in a game is either through minigames or interactive dialogue. In *Mass Effect 2*, if you take the time to chat with your crew between missions, it gives the player a sense of ownership of the experience that can't be found in any other medium. More importantly, if a player chooses to develop their character's silver tongue, key encounters can be solved without ever having to draw a weapon.

"I'd argue that for some players – myself included – my power fantasy when playing a role-playing game is to confront a villain, explain point-by-point why his master plan is flawed, and then get him to admit that he hadn't thought things through as carefully as I had, and ask me what I think he should do," says Avellone. "Conversation-based player characters in games can have their badass moments just as much as someone wielding a gun, and we've definitely included moments like that in Alpha Protocol and Fallout: New Vegas."

Such choices, or even just the illusion of such choices, have been the high points in a range of memorable game narratives, from Chrono Trigger to Metal Gear Solid 3.

And yet still the majority of supposedly interactive stories are portrayed exclusively though non-interactive cut-scenes.

"Half-Life 2 weaved an interactive story that wasn't a cut-scene into the gameplay - the result was powerful and immersive," says Avellone. "Ideally, you don't want to communicate a story via cut scenes or anything that paralyses the player or reduces them to a passive state - at that point, it's not a game, it's a movie. The design philosophy with narrative is that you want to make it part of the level design and, if possible, make it part of the game mechanics. In Alpha Protocol, the decisions you make on the dialogue timer conversations are timed and move ahead in real time, so you need to gauge your target and choose responses quickly – it's like combat dialogue. This makes narrative very much like a game, where you need to choose your attitude and action quickly, keep the flow of the conversation going, and convey a sense of urgency. Furthermore, if you've done your research on the subject you're speaking to, you'll know their triggers, what attitudes they respond to."

s much as games are routinely mocked for their superficial plots and poor dialogue, trying to tell a compelling story in a game is a much more complicated affair than in a movie.

Not only does the script have to be good, it has to be exponentially longer, and then there are technical limitations to overcome, such as those that currently leave non-player characters rooted to the spot for the whole game, spouting their few lines of dialogue - or following a purgatorial loop around the same small area.

"The work that Jeff Hawkins is doing at the moment is very interesting," says Matthies. "He's creating a theory around the neo-cortex that in the future should mean we can have proper artificially intelligent characters in a game. Although that won't happen for some time."

"There is a technological end of it, as there always will be due to the nature of our medium," Hecker admits. "But I think it's primarily a design intent problem, where we have to simply try hard to figure out how to do it, and not just fall back on the 'easy' stuff like canned cut-scenes splitting up interactive action

sequences. I think the very

concepts of 'story' and 'character'

are problematic when interactivity is in the mix, but we have to dive headlong into figuring out how interactivity works at an emotional level so we can suss out our strengths and weaknesses. We're very conservative as an industry from a design standpoint, which is frustrating, given that I think we can be the pre-eminent art and entertainment form of the 21st century if we figure this stuff out."

The problem with violence in videogames isn't its mythical ability to corrupt the nation's youth, but that for so long it has been the only meaningful interaction with the game world. Alternatives have always existed, but only in the last few years have they begun to permeate into the major blockbusters. When they become as much a part of the language of game design as 20-hit combos, the medium will become richer, and offer rewards to those people who see no merit in it now.

"I don't think it's a problem, insofar as it is really just a symptom of the immaturity of our form," says Hecker. "I think violence is a tool that will be in the toolbox, but it will be joined by other actions and emotions, hopefully including love, jealousy, betrayal, and all the other characteristics that make art great and are meaningful to people.

"Violence is meaningful and powerful, except when you use it to the exclusion of all other dramatic and emotional tools; then it just becomes gratuitous and meaningless. Killing your hundredth orc is no different from killing your tenth orc, but killing your spouse in a jealous rage and then having to deal with the consequences is completely different and is the stuff of great art... Uh, fictionally speaking, that is."

# can have their badass moments just as much ersation-based player characters in games ne wielding a gun

# 'I CAN'T WORK THE BUTTONS'

ALTHOUGH VIOLENCE is undeniably overrepresented, not everyone agrees that this is the primary barrier to non-gamers gaining an interest in the medium. As far as Matthies is concerned, it's actually the complexity of controls that put most people off.

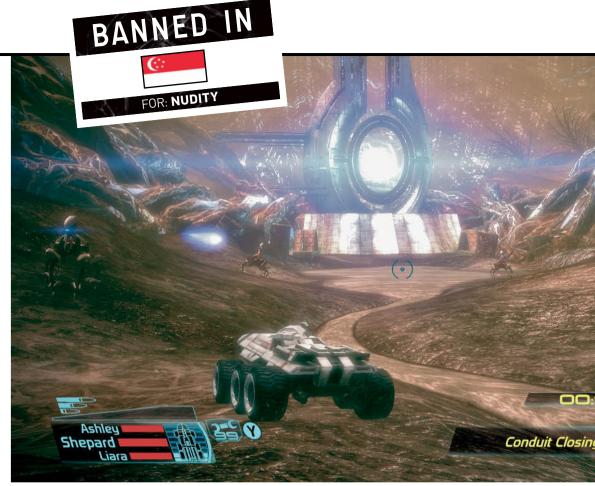
"There are a lot of games that don't involve violence at all and, although not everybody's tastes are covered by the current selection of video games, I don't think that this is necessarily putting off as many people as the controls. This might be why the Wii is successful, because it has a more intuitive control system. If you want to construct a game around something more complicated, if you want to have a philosophical debate between characters, then you're going to need an extremely complicated system, and I don't think that would be accessible to most people."

"I remember we tried testing *The Darkness* with a group of non-gamers and it was a complete disaster. They couldn't even work out how to leave the first room. They just didn't understand the controls or how to interact with the game."



#### MIGHT AND MAGIC

₀8 Once you are in control of your ship, the Normandy, you will be free to roam the galaxy and tackle missions. When you choose to leave the ship you'll be asked to select two members from your crew of six to accompany you. Each individual has unique strengths and abilities that can be levelled up as the game progresses, and it pays to nurture these skills to give you more options. The one character we could never do without, however, was Liara, a member of the Asari race with the ability to lift, throw and freeze enemies with her mind. By the end of our game Liara was able to raise a dozen enemies into the air, leaving you free to shoot them and watch their lifeless bodies crash to the ground.



Below: Before each mission you will be asked to choose a landing party. All experience gained on the mission will be added to every member.





#### ANOTHER BRILLIANT GAME? THERE JUST AREN'T ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY

# Mass Effect\*

FORMAT: Xbox 360 ORIGIN: Canada PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: BinWare PRICF: £49.99 RELEASE: 20 November 2007 PLAYERS: 1





Below: Your most predominant enemy will be the Geth - a sentient machine race allied with your great enemy, Saren. There are numerous other races that you will encounter and have to fight, but part of the joy is not knowing who the enemy is.



Above: There are a number of surprises in Mass Effect, including the decidedly seedy option to enjoy a lap dance. Which we did. Twice.

#### Half an hour to game time and Will Wright is beginning to look nervous.

In 30 short minutes he'll be addressing hundreds of people, attempting to justify BAFTA's milestone decision to welcome a game designer into its fellowship - a rare collection of talent that includes Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, Woody Allen and all stops in between. Clearly, he has better things to think about than the questions being posed by the handful of journalists sitting before him, a group games<sup>TM</sup> is proud to be part of. What he will say in his speech - as he now tells us and as the waiting audience is about to find out - is that games aren't stories. The craft of storytelling is a significant personal interest, but for Wright videogames are not the place to practise it.

When Wright speaks the industry listens, and that level of prestige is not easily bestowed. He has become the resident genius of videogames by providing the player with a set of tools and allowing a story to be created

through their application. Linear storytelling is not a recurring feature in Wright's body of work, but WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE we see his assertion that games are not capable of adequately sustaining it as short sighted. Player

agency is vitally important to a medium that has interactivity at its core, but developers are blurring the line between the two with increasing success. Once upon a time the concept of the novel was deemed absurd. For its first 20 years cinema was devoted to documentaries. Developers of story-driven games should be allowed more time to construct the appropriate language before judgement is passed.

The way that BioShock fused its narrative and gameplay was a great achievement, giving your actions intellectual weight beyond mere button presses. The story was linear and 2K Boston was constantly driving you toward its conclusion - arguably at the expense of gameplay polish - but

it is a tantalising glimpse of the way that interactivity and a preordained narrative can work in harmony. BioWare's Mass Effect is a brilliant continuation of that hopefully growing trend. Just as BioShock was a shooter with RPG leanings, Mass Effect is an RPG with a tendency for action, but they are united by a reverence for story that transcends traditional gameplay conventions.

It may be that BioWare's design choices will alienate a part of the hardcore RPG audience. Mass Effect certainly becomes more difficult as the game develops, but at no point did we feel compelled to postpone a mission that we'd initially failed in order to level-up our character - all that was required was a slight alteration of strategy. A major failing of archaic RPG design is the way the sense of progress in the story is sacrificed for hours of digression in the name of 'grinding'. Mass Effect's pace and structure has more in common with an action

> or adventure game: the story has three distinct acts, and while there are an abundance of side missions to occupy your time, they feel more like options than necessities. To put it in

to context, the game-clock registered 24 hours when we'd finished Mass Effect, having seen a significant part of what the game had to offer - itself a huge departure from the overwhelming length of a game like Oblivion - while a colleague reached the end in only 12 hours. BioWare is offering breadth and depth, but not at the risk of forcing the player to abandon the story before its conclusion.

This approach is entirely reliant on the story being one worth listening to, and in this sense Mass Effect is a strong contender for the best RPG of the next generation. If Oblivion is used as a reference point that's because, until now, it has been the genre's high benchmark, but the quality of Bethesda's game was almost entirely due to

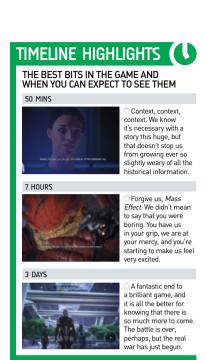
# BIOWARE IS OFFERING BREADTH AND DEPTH, BUT NOT AT THE RISK OF FORCING THE PLAYER TO ABANDON THE STORY BEFORE ITS CONCLUSION

FINGERPR

the storyline.

WORD OF MOUTH: The conversation system may not

be revolutionary but it is utterly gripping, allowing scenes to play without pause, and fluidly advancing









-- Mass Effect is hardly short of detail, but one of its chief pleasures is driving the Mako - an all-terrain vehicle that is airdropped onto the surface of planet you're exploring. The Mako controls similarly to Halo's Warthog but is designed to scale near-vertical slopes, has a set of boosters that shoot it a short way into the air, and has a machine gun and rocket launcher fixed to its body. There is nowhere you can't reach and very little you can't kill with the Mako on your side, and it is brilliant fun to use. The side-missions can get repetitive, but driving the Mako never does.

its scope. The narrative around which its grandeur was pinned is standard fantasy fare, but the Mass Effect universe follows in the footsteps of BioShock's Rapture as one of the most complete and coherent worlds we've witnessed. There is an occasional reliance on science-fiction cliché, but with such detail and care present in every facet of the game's mythology it hardly seems to matter. There are twists and turns, but not the grandstanding kind featured in BioShock. This is a subtle, multi-layered narrative that seldom surprises, but compels you through its sense of sheer momentum.

There are no duplicate endings here - Mass Effect will eventually be a trilogy,

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FIGHTING CHANCE: BioWare is relying on players

making pro-active use of the save system. But this

game is so engrossing we were caught out many times. More checkpoints would be helpful.

after all - and that sense of inevitability will disappoint those that too readily believed the wild promises made by the hype. The choices you make and the way you develop the abilities

of your character and crew do affect the experience, but given the linear nature of the story it is more evident in the details surrounding the main plot. One of the chief pleasures in finishing Mass Effect was to sit down with the lucky few that had played it, discussing the varying ways you came upon certain side missions, who your friends, allies and lovers were.

The character you play is invariably called Shepard, and you begin by choosing their

sex, upbringing and reasons for joining the military - facts that will influence the way your character is regarded from the outset. Your choice of the six character classes dictates which skills you are able to level up, though these generally relate to your proficiency with certain weapons, technological abilities, and resistance to damage, rather than anything that will further define the person your Shepard will be.

■ The choices you make throughout the game add points to one of two meters relating to the good and bad in your character: Paragon and Renegade. Altruistic behaviour will add points to Paragon while selfish or brutal choices will

> fill up Renegade, but there is enough subtle ambiguity in the game's story for an event to add one point, eight points, or even points to both depending on what you decide to do. You can

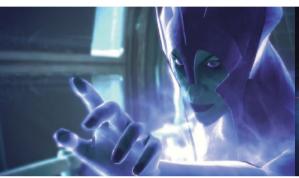
check on the level of your two meters at any time, but points are awarded in a wide variety of ways and discreetly enough so that you may not even realise the direction you have been taking your version of Shepard. We made a concerted effort to be a heroic, charming, ladies' man, but we relish the prospect of returning to the game as a decrepit, malicious old lady and explore the avenues in the game that were previously closed to us.

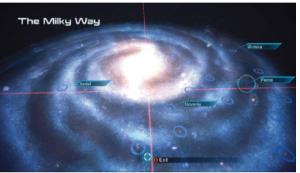




MME







Above: Shepard's ship is the Normandy, which serves as a hub throughout the game. Everyone on your crew can be found scattered throughout its interior. You can also navigate using the galaxy map at the ship's centre.

Perhaps the most discussed element of Mass Effect is its conversation system, which, if you believe the hype, offers the most realistic interactions ever seen in a game. Those expecting a revolution in the way dialogue scenes play out will be disappointed, but this is yet another instance of hype overselling genuine innovation to the detriment of the game. Every time a character nears the end of what they have to say, a wheel appears at the bottom of the screen, providing you with various choices of response – including two, highlighted in red and blue, that can only be accessed by levelling-up your Charm and Intimidate skills.

Your responses aren't displayed word-forword but the sentiment or feeling behind it is. Your choices could be as simple as 'I'll do it', 'We'll see', 'No way' and 'Back off or I'll shoot', but each one will lead in a reply of several sentences. Essentially, it's a refinement of the multiple-choice technique used in games like *Monkey Island*, but because you don't have to stop and read four whole sentences you can make a decision before the other character has even finished talking. This is a minor change with a profound effect, giving

Above: The most intriguing of the game's many alien races is the Asari. You recruit one as a member of your squad in the early stages. Their ability to manipulate enemies with telekinesis has a spectacular effect mid firefibit.

#### FAQs

#### Q. ANY OTHER FLAWS?

The animation can be jerky, and more often than we'd like. In fairness, *KOTOR* suffered similar problems, and that was still great.

#### Q. HOW BAD IS IT?

That's a personal call. Some gamers can be very anal about technical glitches. We aren't among them but you have been warned.

#### Q. BUT WHY?

It's a wildly ambitious game, and if you're not impressed because of a dodgy texture and a bit of slowdown then you have no soul. the dialogue scenes the sense of fluidity and dynamism essential to the pace of the story.

BioWare has realised that, regardless of how fantastic the game's setting is, a sense of reality is vital to the audience immersing themselves in the story. We have played videogames since we were old enough to grasp a joystick, and it is becoming obvious that certain archaic tropes are standing in the way of this goal. There are gameplay elements that just scream 'I'm a videogame!' and turn-based combat - as evidenced in the otherwise excellent Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic - is one of the main offenders. This will be anathema to dyed-in-the-wool RPG fans, but BioWare's decision to use a dynamic combat system for Mass Effect is essential to the quality of the experience. To streamline the genre's conventions with such skill, but rely on the laboured back and forth of turn-based battles would have been a massive tonal error.

•• Of course, this places much importance on the combat being refined enough to support the rest of the game, but again Mass Effect succeeds admirably. No, this isn't Gears Of War, but to expect such a high standard of carnage from an RPG is to place your expectations far beyond reasonable possibility. The aiming is very forgiving – though this can be altered through the Pause menu – but the fact that there are moments when Mass Effect's combat is reminiscent of Rainbow Six Vegas is a truly unexpected surprise.

Mass Effect deserves effusive praise, but it is not without weakness. The near total absence of checkpoints can be unbearably frustrating if you die an hour into a vital mission, making regular, manual saves an irritating necessity. There are also numerous instances when half of your conversation options seem to be saying exactly the same thing, leading to genuine but unproven doubt as to how different the game will be for contrasting iterations of Shepard's character. But in the face of such flawless execution these are mere trifles, and nothing will dampen your desire to begin again just as soon as the final credits begin their slow creep up the screen.

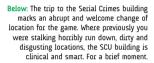
The time we spent with Mass Effect ranks as one of the most rewarding experiences we have had this year, and with the medium in such rude health that is quite a compliment. The observation that a game plays like a film has become trite through sheer overuse, and the sentiment is seldom accurate. With Mass Effect, however, we can finally apply it with confidence. With Halo off the radar for the foreseeable future, Microsoft has a new trilogy to fly the flag, one that provides a convincing definition of what cinematic gaming could and should be – its name is Mass Effect, and Sony will need more than Metal Gear Solid 4 to top this.

NOTHING WILL DAMPEN YOUR DESIRE
TO BEGIN AGAIN JUST AS SOON AS
THE FINAL CREDITS BEGIN THEIR
SLOW CREEP UP THE SCREEN

VERDICT 9/10
BRILLIANT, AND THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

#### **Collector's Edition**

→ Unlike the original game, which forced you to collect dead birds and pieces of metal, and smash up TV sets to earn unlockable story material, Condemned 2 is a more diverse title. But even better than that is the way the game ties collectables into character stats, rather than the story. In order to get the best rank (bronze, silver, or gold) at the end of each level you should aim to collect everything you can. 'Collect' is a loose term as now you need to tune into TV broadcasts, listen to radios, destroy crack-den machinery, and complete quick-time responses, among other things. They all feel more natural to the world, rather than additional items you should pick up to get a better picture of what's happening. And they're more fun, too.









"KILL FIRST... OR BE A ROTTING CORPSE FOR THE BIRDS"

# Condemned 2

#### **DFTAILS**

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS:
PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Monolith
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 4 April 2008
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Below: The crime scene investigations are much, much better in *Condemned 2*. The reason they work so well is that they force players to deduce what's going on. Unlike its predecessor, which almost patronised players in its simplicity.



Above: It's no BioShock, but you can't deny it's a beautiful title. A snowy retreat emerges as one of the game's best-looking locations.

"That's me. Ethan Thomas. Drunk, tired, and pissed off. Why? 'Coz this damned city's too fuckin' blind to see what's killing 'em!" So proclaims the protagonist of Condemned 2 mere seconds before punching a nearby wall with his bare fists; several seconds before telling a homeless guy extending his hand to help to "Piss off"; a minute before flipping that same homeless guy the bird, who then retaliates, "Ooh, we got ourselves a mean drunk... a real grade-A asshole." All before some hobo takes a brick and beats you in the face. This is the over-the-top, intense and violent world of Condemned 2. It's also extremely silly.

Take Ethan himself. In the first game, he was an overweight everyman thrust into a dark and oppressive world. Someone you could empathise with given how normal he was. Now, however, he's a ripped, greasy, dirty, stinking wreck of an alcoholic. Someone who, in the game's opening cut-scene, chugs down spirits and pills, smashes his glass and then beats some freak's face into mush

before a bartender pulls a shotgun on him. This is not the same Ethan Thomas, and his change of appearance and character jars like The Prince in Sands Of Time and Warrior

Within. Losing Greg Grunberg as voice actor and making every second word an expletive is conspicuous whereas taking the character into darker territory is appreciated. All accentuated by the increasingly horrific world around him. This new Ethan is also laughable at times, and so is Monolith for allowing such a transformation.

Get past this bizarre character evolution, however, and you'll find a much better game than the original. In most areas, Monolith demonstrates its understanding of how to build on the foundations set by its predecessor, taking what worked and what didn't and releasing a more entertaining follow-up. There's an increased focus on narrative, with some big revelations, variations

to the gameplay, diversity in locations, more gunplay, and better graphics and sound. If Condemned was a survival-horror by way of David Fincher, its sequel is an action-horror directed by Rob Zombie. Bloody, visceral, and adopting a faster pace for the franchise. The first game was content to leave a lot to the imagination, Ethan investigating locations mostly unaware of what was going on. Emphasis was on sound design, sparse music, exploring filthy and devastated locations, intently hoping that some crowbarwielding fruitcake wasn't hiding around the next corner.

•• Condemned 2, in comparison, ratchets everything up a notch. Ethan is supposed to be in the worst condition of his life – drunk, with a horrible attitude and breath to match, not to mention jaundiced eyes – however, he's built like a tank and always first to throw fists in a fight. He can handle himself much better now, and by virtue of that the player can feel more confident exploring the environments.

Although this does negate the horror, with nothing in the sequel coming close to Bart's Department Store from the original game. Condemned 2 will freak you out, making

you jump, and putting images in your head that are hard to shake, but it won't get beneath your skin and stay there, forcing a shudder every time you think of that bit involving mannequins. There's a nod to the suited figures here, and it's very neat, but it also reminds you of just how terrifying its predecessor was.

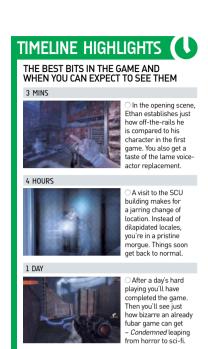
In fact, Condemned 2 contains many references to the first game. That terrifying exploration, by UV light, of the home of Serial Killer X is reprised, as Ethan follows several wires in Leland Vanhorn's snowy cabin retreat. Fans of the original will get a kick out of a certain trip to a high-school meat locker. The story covers a lot of the same ground: Ethan enters the Most Wanted list again,

# <u>ENHANCED</u>

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CRIME SCENES: No longer patronising, the crime scenes are much better than in the original game, and more fun. STORY TIME: The level of storytelling is better, answering all your questions about *Condemned*.

CONDEMNED 2 IS SURPRISINGLY DIVERSE,
KEEPING THINGS FRESH BY PULLING BRILLIANT
NEW TWISTS ON GAMEPLAY







Above: Yes, the mannequins make a return, but it's nothing more than a cameo. However, they also underline that the original game is far scarier than the sequel.



→ One of the best new features in Condemned 2 is the ability to play the whole game, once you have completed it, in standard First-Person Shooter mode. The emphasis here, of course, is on firearms. You can still wield melee weapons, but every gun you carry will have unlimited ammo. It's an interesting gameplay mode because it shows, even as a straight FPS, that Condemned 2 is a cut above many of its contemporaries. Achievements can still be earned as you play in this mode, making the game extremely easy. There is a chance many gamers, if they choose to complete Condemned 2 multiple times, will do so this way once it has been unlocked.

following a serial killer for a small portion of the game, and while it makes sense of the previous title's story, providing a clearer image of what happened, it lacks that game's compelling conceit. Condemned had a unique premise: Serial Crimes Investigator Ethan Thomas, framed for murder and trying to prove his innocence, following a serial killer who murders other serial killers based on their own twisted methods.

Some gamers – ourselves included at one point - wished Condemned had stuck to its simple original premise before veering into crazy hallucinatory horror. Thanks to answers provided by this sequel, however, it's clear that Condemned is headed somewhere special. And between Condemned and F.E.A.R.

Monolith easily has two of the most interesting horror franchises on its hands. Horror, that is, until the final levels when Condemned 2 descends into fullblown science fiction.

It's at this point that most of the pieces begin to fall into place and you realise just how farreaching the implications of the story are.

The journey toward realisation takes you through a number of locations, in various states of dilapidation and decay. Murky alleyways and back streets, crack dens, a rustic set of commuter tracks, a doll factory, a theatre... the only respite comes in a brief trip to the Serial Crimes Unit's main building.

By this point you will have sampled the quicktime responses in combat, jabbing needles into the eyes of crack heads, breaking necks and arms too. Environmental kills even enable you to send an enemy headfirst into a TV set, off a balcony, or into a dirty toilet bowl. Among other things, you can slam them, brow first, into tables, and put their heads in drill presses until their skulls pop open. It's shocking just how much the game lets you do, but more surprising than that is how Monolith got away without suffering at the hands of the ESRB.

... The sight of burning baby dolls moving toward you, exploding when you get close, are unnerving. Even worse are the nails

iammed into their faces and the way their glowing red eyes watch you. A succession of switch pulling and valve turning, the doll factory is arguably the worst part of the whole game.

It feels entirely by-the-numbers and ends with a nuisance of a boss battle. And it doesn't help that the plot takes a turn for the unintentionally bizarre, when a Serial Crimes Agent informs you, over your comms unit, how to navigate the building. He used to play there as a child and knows all of the factory's details. For example, the manager wrote the combination for a lock on his wall, which was only visible under UV light. Thankfully,



BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ACTION/HORROR: The first game pushed for cerebral and intense horror. The sequel continues it but ratchets up the action too. As such, it's a less intense but more enjoyable game.

Right: The Doll Factory is certainly an unsettling piece of design, especially with the exploding baby dolls. But it's also the most generic.

Left: Almost immediately, Condemned 2 reveals itself as bleak and oppressive. Five minutes in and some dude with a bizarre mouth cracks you over the head with a brick.





Left: One of the most delightful - and surprising - aspects of this sequel is that you aren't fighting the same kind of enemies from start to finish At one point special agents in balaclava's show up with guns, adding more diversity.

after this razorblade lollipop-filled excursion, Condemned 2 gathers pace once again.

Immediately after the doll factory, you will experience how action-packed the seguel is, with the arrival of assault-rifle-wielding freaks that you must kill before picking up their weapons. Although Condemned 2 lacks a crosshair, it makes up for it with precision aiming. The gun-based combat is very similar to King Kong and Call Of Cthulhu, albeit faster-paced and more violent. The way heads explode as you shoot enemies is extremely satisfying, and the developer displays its expertise with the balance of action and horror. Just when you think the game is about to throw the same old arena sequence at you, it introduces a new scenario. Stranded on the ground unable to move, defending yourself with a nailgun; following blood trails, with a UV light, in the pitch-dark night as enemies jump out; arena-style battles with vagrants; getting chased through a cabin by a bear, angrily demolishing rooms in its pursuit.

One of Condemned 2's strengths is how surprisingly diverse it is. While the original relied mostly on place and sound design to maintain interest, Condemned 2 keeps things fresh by pulling brilliant new twists Above: The combat has received a massive overhaul allowing you to string attacks together.

#### Q. ANY OTHER MODES?

There's Fight Club mode which was apparently conceived to test the depth of new combat, before finding its way into the game

### Q. CLIFFHANGER ENDING?

Yes, but nowhere near as cryptic as Condemned. Here it sets up the next game perfectly, showing how farreaching this story is.

#### Q. WORSE THAN MANHUNT?

It's definitely surprising how dark and violent the game is, but it was also made in conjunction with the ESRB, so boots for sneaking, and a foot-stomp combo as well as better aiming, all of which infuse Condemned 2 with genuine stats building. Crime scene investigation is worth mentioning because it no longer patronises the player; Condemned may have been rated 18 by the BBFC, but it also took much of the fun out of investigations by selecting the right tools on your behalf. It was little more than holding the X-button, aiming the piece of equipment, and lining up a shot/UV light/ blood sample. Now, most of the crime scenes aren't compulsory, they have been devised in a way that puts emphasis on choice as well as deduction. For example, a slain cop lies

before you: are they male or female? Old or

on gameplay - in a trip to a dilapidated

theatre, it even borders on BioShock levels

of brilliance. A good deal of enjoyment is

reliant on whether you understand this kind

of game, and despite its gunplay, this is still a

first-person brawler more than anything else.

Melee combat has seen an overhaul, adding

depth to the original's block/hit structure -

a combo counter even appears when you time

strikes, linking multiple hits. One problem we

encountered was acclimatising to using both

triggers as block, rather than right-trigger for

hit and left-trigger for block as in the original.

And for some reason, this seguel doesn't let

you wield guns as makeshift melee weapons

after ammunition has run out. Players receive

upgrades as they play, including increased

fist damage through knuckle busters, quieter

young? How did they die? Gunshot? Entry or exit wound? Where? Several options to choose result in a five-point score system. If you get Poor results it won't restart the crime scene, just keep playing the game regardless of what rating you earned for your deduction skills. Crime scenes add an extra dimension to Condemned 2, though its unfortunate Monolith realised its potential after already using the first game's conceit. With this same level of investigating, the original would have birthed a classic horror videogame not a cult title.

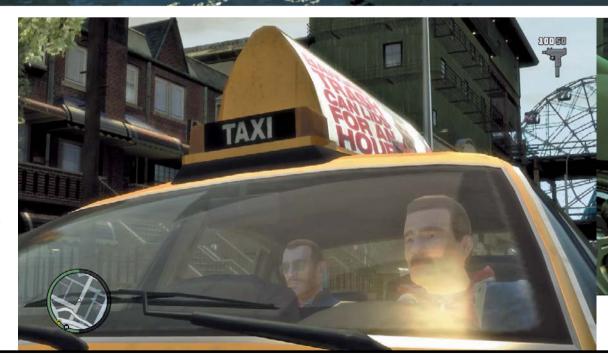
A good seguel builds on the potential of its predecessors to create a much better experience, and Monolith has ensured that Condemned 2 does just that. Fears that the game retraces too many familiar steps emerge early, but that soon vanishes as the story picks up, and questions raised in the original are answered. Some unfortunate hiccups, like the aforementioned doll factory, do present themselves, and the replacement voice for Greg Grunberg - who had stated his desire to return but was declined by Monolith - is pretty horrible most of the time. There's also the problem of it not being anywhere near as terrifying or intense as the original. Despite these ailments, Condemned 2 is a sequel mostly done right. Mostly.

A GOOD SEQUEL BUILDS ON THE POTENTIAL OF ITS PREDECESSORS TO CREATE A MUCH BETTER EXPERIENCE

VERDICT 8/10 BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL BUT NOT AS TERR

#### **CRAZY TAXIS**

→ The size of GTA IV's Liberty City can be intimidating, particularly when a significant number of the missions ask you to drive long distances between destinations. Keeping good time is now more essential than ever, and Rockstar has given you the ability to use the city's abundant cab services as a passenger. By holding the button rather than just tapping it, Niko will climb into the back and you can instruct the driver where to take you, how fast to drive, or simply skip the entire experience for an extra charge - as the missions become harder the ability to cut out repeated car journey's is a welcome addition. However, if you have the time to just sit back and enjoy the ride, the teeming life of Liberty City and the freakish cab drivers provide brilliant entertainment.





ROCKSTAR RETURNS TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME. CHAOS AND GENIUS ENSUE

# Grand Theft Auto IV\*

#### DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games
DEVELOPER: Rockstar North
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 29 April 2008
PLAYERS: 1 (2-16 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Left: The improvements made to the driving overshadows any concerns over GTA IV's lack of aeroplanes. The return of both boats and helicopters provide even more transport options. There is a famous saying, a relic from the heyday of Sinatra's Rat Pack, "This is Frank's world. We just live in it." It is a deliberately bombastic statement made at a time when pop culture was free from the bewildering diversity that defines the modern age, when a cocky

kid from Hoboken, New York could hold Western society in his thrall by singing other people's songs and looking dapper in a tux. Our mediasaturated world is now

far too savvy and perhaps too cynical for such meagre abilities to result in that level of power and influence. We have seen the machine. We understand how it works. Our Sinatras will have to settle for dominating their chosen fields, and the videogame industry's Rat Pack is a party of one. This is *Grand Theft Auto's* world, and we just live in it.

THE GOOD FIGHT: Where combat was once GTA's

**EUPHORIA**: The physics engine adds a new dimension to gameplay. *GTA IV* is much more dynamic than ever.

The impact that *Grand Theft Auto III* had on game design is obvious. Openworld structures are steadily permeating every genre, freeing developers from the

shackles of linear progression, and moving us a significant step closer to this industry's very own Holy Grail – a feeling of ultimate freedom, of existing within a complete, alternate reality. Sticklers might tell you that *Body Harvest* got there first, but a chorus of 15 million voices is waiting in the

wings, ready to shout them down. Others may have dabbled, but *GTA III* carried a sense of confidence and verve that allowed it to leap far above its antecedents, calling

for widespread attention and opening up gaming to fresh eyes.

The expansion of the gaming audience, for which Nintendo is now applauded, arguably began with the release of PlayStation. Sony used modern marketing principles to create a brand with genuine cultural cache, resulting in a level of popularity that few thought possible from a company just entering the market. Grand Theft Auto III was the ideal expression of what PlayStation brought to the industry, speaking directly to an audience that had



Above: The decision to stand and fight is now in your hands. The improved combat system means you can take on enemies and the police in greater numbers with real confidence.

Below: Niko's struggle for redemption has the most compelling story and script of any Grand Theft Auto game with some of the series' most memorable characters.



**Right:** The driving mechanics have also been vastly improved. It may never quite reach the quality of *Project Gotham Racing 4*, but the fact that it even invites comparison is a massive achievement.





Below: Losing your Wanted Level is now far more logical, requiring you to escape a certain area without any police spotting you. This cuts down the number of frustrating replays required by the more difficult missions.





Above: Visually, Grand Theft Auto IV surpasses all expectations. Liberty City is a triumph of character and detail, and when viewed on a rainy night it's one of the most ravishing spectacles in gaming.

#### THIS IS THE MODERN WAY

₃ The mobile phone is just one addition to GTA IV that places it so clearly in the modern world. It is reasonable to assume that every good gangster has a mobile phone, but Rockstar has also added its very own version of the internet, which can be accessed from any terminal in the game's Twa cafes. Like everything in the game, the internet is fully exploited for its comedic potential, but it also acts as a conduit for back story regarding the family Niko left behind and side missions offered by your contacts. There is also an online dating service that you can use to find a new girlfriend and figure out which activities they are most likely to respond too.





#### **FAQ**s

#### Q. WHAT OF THE MUSIC?

It is a diverse soundtrack, if perhaps not as effortlessly evocative as that of *Vice City*.

#### Q. KEY TUNES?

Queen's One Vision was a surprise, as was ELO's Evil Woman, but Alexander O'Neal's Criticise takes the prize for sheer, gleeful crapness.

#### Q. AND THE CHATTER?

Hilarious, as always, and if you pay attention you might even find a very special guest among the spoof adverts. never been associated with gaming before: smart, mature, culture savvy, and style conscious. Sony has often been credited with ushering in the age of 'lifestyle' gaming, and *GTA III*'s freeform aesthetic brought a new depth of meaning to that whole concept. If it's possible to credit a single game with modernising both the industry and the way it creates and markets its products, you'd be hard pressed to find a more convincing candidate.

Grand Theft Auto IV will make only a fraction of that impact, but from the opening seconds to the moment you finish the story and are let loose to bend Liberty City to your will, it is clear that Rockstar North is no longer shooting for a revolution. This is the culmination of a seven-year process of refinement that encompasses both Vice City and San Andreas, Grand Theft Auto IV's ancestors were monumental achievements in their own time and the game clearly displays their influence, but even more telling is the wealth of ideas and concepts that didn't make the grade. There is no weightwatching here, no empty expanses of land, no exercise regimes to test your dedication to Rockstar's fiction, no dizzying arrays of hats, coats, jeans, jackets, and shoes; everything about Grand Theft Auto IV feels streamlined, tighter, and more mature.

Since its unexpected delay there has been a feeling of tension in the air, a degree of uncertainty over whether any company could sustain such an incredible

AND BIG-SCREEN TELEVISIONS

place, and the wealth of interesting cities in the world led to wild speculation about Grand Theft Auto IV's period and location. The London of the Kravs. Pablo Escobar's Colombia, the murky underbelly of Ellroy's Los Angeles; the possibilities were so enticing they made change seem almost inevitable, but the decision to use Liberty City has nothing to do with playing it safe. When Rockstar North embarked upon Grand Theft Auto III the goal was to simulate a living, breathing city, but the freedom you were afforded was largely cosmetic, restricted to a winning combination of driving, shooting, and full control of the car stereo. GTA IV feels like the experience that - but for the limits of technology - Rockstar originally set out to create. There is no mistake. The return

FINGERPR

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**LIVING WORLD:** GTA III seemed to present a fully realised city, but the detail here proves how rudimentary it was.

GTA IV has a sense of the city's internal life, with crimes,

crashes, and deep conversations around every corner.

to Liberty City is a very deliberate statement: *Grand Theft Auto III* is the past, welcome to the future.

■ Both San Andreas and Vice City were

impressively detailed, but it was impossible to avoid the sense that these places existed because you did. With *Grand Theft Auto IV*, however, the evidence that Liberty City lives in spite if your presence is on every street corner, and down every alley. Chaos is still very much the byword, but this time you aren't the only one causing it. Rockstar's reboot of Liberty City is a seedy whirlwind of incident, drama, and overheard conversations, amounting to

the first time. Looking out over Liberty City's neon-studded carpet of rooftops and skyscrapers, the full extent of Rockstar's achievement opens up before you. Played by day, shrouded in the thick haze of summer heat, it is a hallucinatory spectacle that ranks alongside anything you will have seen in this generation. Take the journey by night, gliding over that vast tract of light, dark, and colour, and you might just break into applause at the sheer bravado of it all. If the main game were half as accomplished as it is Grand Theft Auto IV would still be the most exciting release this year, because as soon as the story missions draw to a close the game begins its second lease of life: an entire city and no fixed agenda, just waiting. It is a trump card that no other

videogame can hope to match.

At a fundamental level, it could be argued that the freedom you are afforded is still limited to shooting

and driving. You can't walk into every shop, or talk to every man, woman, cop, and criminal on the street, and many will seize upon this as if it is some kind of broken promise. However, the fact is that, right now, any degree of freedom offered by a game is no more than an illusion; sweep back the curtain and you will see the real wizard, busily working the levers. But by placing life, activity, and detail in just the right places, Rockstar has made the most masterfully balanced and bewitching illusion so far. There are many things Liberty City can't offer you, but it is an ode to Rockstar North's skill that you always seem to find what you need. Two of Grand Theft Auto IV's cups may be empty, but you always pick the one hiding the ball.

■■ Rockstar's skill in subtly directing your gaze is vital to *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s success. The joy of *GTA* lies in exploration, and in less capable hands the awesome sweep of the gameplay may have proved overwhelming. However, Rockstar North tutors you in the details of its bustling metropolis with delicacy and intelligence, only introducing new features as Niko himself is required to learn them. With so much to see and do most developers would barrage you for hours with laboured tutorials, but *Grand Theft Auto IV* is still

# GTA IV IS THE KIND OF GAME THAT MAKES YOU PRAISE THE HEAVENS FOR DARKENED ROOMS

run of form. For six months the world has waited, so let's get it out in the open: Rockstar North has met expectations and, against all the odds, exceeded them. It could never replicate the circumstances that resulted in *Grand Theft Auto III's* visceral gut-punch, and the rose-tint of nostalgia may lead some into stubborn defiance, but don't be fooled. On pure artistic merit, *Grand Theft Auto IV* has surpassed *Vice City* as the very pinnacle of the series.

The return to Liberty City confounded at first. Vice City and San Andreas were seductive evocations of distinct times and

arguablytherichestandmostatmospheric game world ever created. Somehow it feels appropriate to accompany such a definitive comment with a disclaimer like, 'arguably', 'perhaps', or 'possibly'. Going out on a limb in this way is an open invitation for criticism, but this is one sweeping statement buoyed by a profound sense of belief.

Our bottomless affection for the pastel hues of *Vice City* made the idea that it could possibly be bettered seem like a fool's hope. There is one moment, however, when all doubt is washed away. Taking to the skies in a helicopter for



feeding you new activities and toys after two days of dedicated playing. The breathless sense of discovery never dips and never slows until the final hours of the story, but to reveal too many of its tricks and secrets would undermine what Rockstar has laboured so carefully to achieve. We sat, slack-jawed for 40 hours, and when it was over we just wanted more. The modern world is crammed with useless distractions, but this is the kind of game that makes you praise the heavens for darkened rooms and big-screen televisions.

For those who have always harboured suspicions over Grand Theft Auto's supposed quality, it may be reassuring to know that the vast effort poured into GTA IV encompasses both the old and the new. Even the series' most ardent and unshakable devotees would concede that the combat has always left something to be desired, particularly when such a significant amount of its gameplay hinges on that very activity. Now, however, Niko moves and fires in a manner reminiscent of Nathan Drake, sliding his lithe frame in and out of cover with athletic grace. Granted, the aiming isn't perfect, but these mechanics would support a dedicated action game with ease, turning missions that might once have seemed frustrating chores into experiences of exhilarating immediacy, the outcome under your full control.

■ The driving has also undergone a significant, albeit more subtle revision. There is a sense of weight to the individual cars that makes cornering at speed far more complicated than simply hitting the handbrake at the right time. There is a depth to the control that must be both learned and mastered if you are to successfully outrun your pursuers, and combined with the combat it gives the game an entirely new dimension. Another frequent criticism of the series is the lack of variety in the missions, but the vast improvements made to that ubiquitous combination of driving and shooting has rendered it almost irrelevant. With so many tasks spread across the narrative, covering the same ground is practically unavoidable, but play Grand Theft Auto IV as Rockstar intends - mixing story and side missions with socialising and the odd rampage - and only the most hardened cynic could fail to be impressed by its progress. Missions like Three Leaf Clover, Tunnel Of Death, and Dust Off display not just a fresh confidence in the



Right: The combat is now so much more compelling that the previous games' most nersistent flaws have all but disappeared. One of the levels in GTA IV is better than the whole of Kane & Lvnch: Dead Men.

it has always done well. Grand Theft

Auto IV's characters and humour need

not have changed, but even here striking

progress has been made. GTA's trademark





**GRAND THEFT AUTO IV IS THE MOST PROMINENT** LANDMARK ON A CONTINUING PATH TO EVEN MORE VIVID WORLDS, THICKLY SET WITH DRAMA, HUMOUR, AND STORY

Below: You can now take taxis to wherever Niko needs to go. They can be used as a way of savine time, but it is far more fun to just sit back and enjoy the ride.



## TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

## THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

2 HOURS



○ The incessant stream of minor improvements and insignificant details threatens to overwhelm us. Even in a world saturated by rip-offs, GTA IV is a truly impressive sight.

12 HOURS



We take to the air for the first time, and the full glory of Rockstar's mammoth achievement becomes clearly apparent. Moments such as this are rare in any medium.

4 DAY

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

THE GREAT UNKNOWN: Due to piracy fears, GTA IV had to be reviewed in Rockstar's London HO. As such.

there was no time to play the online multiplayer. A full appraisal will follow in a future issue.



The final story mission draws to a close, and the incredible possibilities offered by the side missions, multiplayer, and Liberty City streets open up before you. The fun has just begun.

#### WIN FRIENDS, INFLUENCE PEOPLE

B Niko's mobile phone quickly becomes your most valuable asset, and GTA IV allows you to build or break relationships with other characters to get the most from it. Romantic encounters are entertaining though somewhat trivial diversions, but by socialising with the other criminals and low-lifes Niko encounters you can build up a database of favours just waiting to be called in. By the time we finished playing we could have bombs, guns, and backup goons delivered to where we stood within minutes, with a car to ferry us to our next destination no more than a phone call away. Activities range from mini-games, like pool and darts, to getting drunk and going to strip shows and comedy clubs. Certain characters will also offer you side missions in return for a little care and attention.



mix of broad satire, slapstick and farce contributed enormously to the series' appeal, though the previous games all too often resorted to puerile jokes for easy laughs. This hasn't disappeared altogether of course, and nor would we want it to, but the humour benefits enormously from a menagerie of characters that, for the want of a fresh compliment to throw Rockstar's way, outstrips anything the series has previously offered. By and large, they are still the smartly observed archetypes

that *Grand Theft Auto* is built upon, but this time there are far more exceptions to the rule. Little Jacob's yardie stoner and Brucie's steroidal rage provide cheap. satisfying

fun, whereas the more unbalanced characters, like Dwayne and Derrick McReady, communicate a darkness that the previous games didn't possess. When juxtaposed with such substantial drama even the more base humour is leant extra resonance, but the quality of the writing is another high watermark for the series, for Rockstar, and, with the possible exception of *BioShock*, the industry in general.

\*\*After a few thousand words of considered argument we'd hoped to do more than scratch the surface of what makes *Grand Theft Auto IV* so brilliant. We wanted to unlock its secrets, to expose its philosophy,

but we can only conclude that it is this very defiance of description that sets it apart. Like *Super Mario Galaxy*, it is a confluence of hundreds of ideas, riffs, and touches that leave you struck dumb with admiration. But where *Super Mario Galaxy* felt like the summit of endeavour for a particular type of game – the end of the road, as it were – Rockstar has created something altogether more exciting.

Grand Theft Auto IV is the epitome of a modern videogame. Story, character,

freedom, cinematic style; this is the point at which all the diverging paths that contemporary game design has been travelling since the launch of PlayStation

seem to intersect, and the road doesn't end here. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is the most prominent landmark on a continuing path to even more vivid worlds, thickly set with drama, humour, and story. Here and now, in the current state of the art, there is little else you can reasonably expect a game to do. We would never have thought that by retreading the same patch of ground a studio could leave us feeling like we have just played one of the best videogames of all time. Rockstar has done exactly that.

VERDICT 10/10
A NEW BENCHMARK FOR GAMING







Jack Thompson has become a hated figure in the games industry, but how much of what you 'know' is based on fiction and what on fact? games™ goes to the man himself to find out exactly what's on his mind...







#### FEATURE YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

mongerer. Asshole. Jack
Thompson has been called
many things by anti-censorship
campaigners, the gaming press,
and gamers themselves. He has
become the father who thundered
that videogames were evil, the
schoolteacher who confiscated your
Game Boy, the bully who pounded
you for quoting Wing Commander in
class. In the videogame industry, no
man is more reviled.

So what does he want? Is he out for blood? Does he think videogames should be banned? Apparently not. "All I've said," Thompson explains, "and the only issue at root for me in all of this, for six years, is that unlike in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and now Japan, in the United States, unfortunately, if a game is labelled inappropriate for someone under 17, you can still sell it to that person. It's nonsensical. It's an anomaly." Ladies and gentlemen, it would seem Mr Thompson is guilty of a truly heinous crime: not wanting five-year-olds to stomp hookers to death on the outskirts of Los Santos, San Andreas.

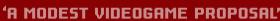
Why, then, have we turned against him with such vigour? And how does he feel about it? "Oh, they've been far too kind," he laughs. "I've got a bad temper. I am not a perfect person, and certainly, those who are my enemies – and believe me, the industry is collectively my enemy – are going to point out what my flaws are, and they're probably correct in identifying them. So, to the extent that they help me by pointing out my flaws, I

appreciate it. I understand the 'I Hate Jack Thompson' t-shirts, and they're entitled to sell them and so forth, but when it goes beyond the point of that to targeting me for death threats, and people actually calling and using computer-generated voices saying 'we're coming over to your house right now to kill you', that's not what democracy is all about. It really is 'shoot the messenger.' The bad news comes from someone like me about what's wrong with the industry, and they think I'm the problem. There's going to be a movement and there already is a movement in government to move in on the videogame industry. And I'm not the author of that; I've been trying to warn them that it's coming. But they make it out to be. 'Here we have runaway Jack Thompson, enemy of Western culture.' They think I really am the enemy of freedom. But as a history major, let me make this point: it's fair to suggest that most people think there's an increasing licentiousness in this culture, not rampant censorship. I think that anyone who says the Western world is perilled by censorship is certifiably insane."

HIS POINT RINGS true: Nineteen Eighty-Four is 22 years late, and if GTA: San Andreas is any indication, it won't be here for a long time. While he's not in favour of stopping violent games all together, Thompson does admit he's afraid of what kind of effect a Rockstar-dominated industry will have on culture at large. "Dan Houser, Rockstar's creative vice president, was interviewed in the New York Times.

He said that, eventually, Rockstar's games would be considered culture. He didn't say 'pop culture'; he said 'culture'. So, we get it: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* will one day be right up there with *The Merchant Of Venice*. That's how out of touch with reality and how, frankly, uneducated these people are. They know the price of everything and the value of nothing. They're technologically adroit and morally bankrupt."

"In the long run, I think I'm the person who's trying to maximise the freedom of the creative arts, but there's got to be responsibility that goes with this technology. The Greeks said that real art is what points to what is beautiful, good, or true. I don't think you can say that about Rockstar. If they want to call themselves 'creative' and 'artistic', then they've got to live by the rules of what the arts are. They have to take the power of their art seriously. When Houser says, 'this is one day going to be culture', the scary thing is that he's probably right. So he'd best be careful about what kind of culture he's creating. You know, we're in a socalled 'War on Terror'. The President has called it that. Of course, one of the great and certainly most visible means by which radical Islamists recruit to their causes is the argument that America is 'The Great Satan'. They talk about America's exportation of its cultural sewage to the rest of the world. And when you look at something like Rockstar Games, and what they dump into the lives of kids everywhere, what's the rebuttal to their argument?"



Thompson's best remembered faux pas was his challenge on the industry last October. He sent a letter entitled 'A Modest Videogame Proposal' to sites such as GameSpot and GamePolitics as well as the Entertainment Software Association's Doug Lowenstein. It challenged the game industry to, "create, manufacture, distribute, and sell", a game in which a father, whose son was killed by a 14-year-old gamer, embarks upon a revenge crusade killing prominent members of the industry including 'TakeThis' CEO, 'Paula Eibeler' (a play on Paul Eibeler, CEO of TakeTwo – a man Thompson had previously called a "sociopathic criminal"), attendees at E3, 'TakeThis'





#### HATE MERCH?

Those 'I Hate Jack Thompson' t-shirts really exist, you know; they're sold by popular American videogame webcomic *Penny Arcade*. It's only fair, however, to give a little background – Thompson actually wrote several letters to various police departments and senators trying to get the comic's writer Jerry Holkins and its artist Mike Krahulik arrested after they sent him an email about their videogame charity Child's Play. Thompson consequently contacted them via telephone, and it's fair to say that communication from both sides was hardly civil. The letter that Thompson sent to the Seattle chief of police alleged that the *Penny Arcade* staff had been harassing him, stating that, "there are a bunch of computer geeks out there who think they have a right to paint targets on your back and on your officers' backs... I look forward to working with your fine police department to shut this little extortion factory down and/or arrest some of its employees". Thompson also contacted VGCats.com comic author Scott Ramsoomair following the publication of one of his comics which parodied Thompson in the Hot Coffee scandal – Ramsoomair hasn't, however, featured his Jack Thompson encounter in any of his merchandise.

Thompson's concern, obviously, stretches to Rockstar's upcoming excrement-stirrer, Bully: "I think it is, in some ways, the most bizarre, over-the-top, and dangerous game anyone's ever come up with, because in this country, the word 'Columbine' means something. The FBI and the Secret Service here both did their threat assessments in the aftermath of Columbine, and they concluded that the two common denominators in most of the school killings were bullying and the immersion of the perpetrators in violent entertainment. And so here you have a game that allows the victims

sale to children? "Well," Thompson says, "there is a duality in the American ethos that has always created tension: liberty and virtue. The founders talked about it, they said one is indispensable to the other. Unfortunately, in America there is an extraordinary imbalance between the two. We've basically got an anarchic view of life and society that's very ill-informed and is certainly not historical. It confirms what many people perceive to be the character of the ugly American: indulge oneself in all things, have no curb on the appetite for anything, and export this selfish hedonism to the rest of the world."

## "ANYONE WHO SAYS THE WESTERN WORLD IS PERILLED BY CENSORSHIP IS CERTIFIABLY INSANE"

of bullying to become the über-bully. Psychologists say that, rather than something like *Bully* being an escape valve for that type of behaviour, it's a rehearsal of it. So of course when you have a generation of kids playing a bully simulator, you're going to get some bleed-over into reality from virtual reality."

WHAT THOMPSON DOESN'T point out is that playing a game like *Bully* will also, no matter how subconsciously, condition children to associate the school environment with violence rather than education. So why has America been so slow to prevent its

"Also, I think a lot of people who don't play the games - the adults who are running the show - don't know what's in the games. The media have been loathe to depict accurately and fully the sociopathic violence in a game like Manhunt because they're afraid it will offend. And it's hard to convey in the abstract the violence present in the games. Beyond that, I think there's an incredible stupidity where people think that whereas food that you put into your stomach can pollute your body and make you unhealthy, somehow what you dump into your brain has no effect on you whatsoever. Of course what you put

into your head has an effect on you. Otherwise, let's take every kid out of every school everywhere on the planet, because education has no effect whatsoever."

Finally, Thompson blames key government and extra-government officials for America's failure to implement a legal ratings system similar to elsewhere. "I think it's been folly for the leaders on this issue in government and outside of government to think that just because you put a label on something it deals with the problem," he argues. "To quote Churchill again - sorry, he's one of my heroes - 'most people, when they stumble across the truth, pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and move on as if nothing had happened.' The liberal approach on this type of issue is to label it and think you've done something about it, and move on as if your labelling of something proscribes it. It doesn't. In fact, in this country, the labelling has been counterproductive, as it's been a marketing tool. If you put an 'M' label on a game, a kid will want to buy it. I'm a Republican, so it pains me to say this, but sometimes it does take societal action and government intervention."

Of course, for those who've been swept up in the media's vitriol, you might not know exactly where Thompson thinks intervention is required. For those who've missed out, Thompson sees Rockstar's games as dangerous because of their messages to the player. "So many people have said," he notes, "'he who tells the stories defines the culture.'

## FEATURE YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

Violence is a fact of life. I think it's dangerous to immerse oneself in it, and it is still in itself problematic, but the story can give it purpose. The story and message of San Andreas is that you can be a sociopath and win the game. When you kill innocent people, and you kill cops, and you stomp women to death, and identify people by colour or racial or ethnic group, that's a message that no kid should get. It's not just violence; it's the sociopathic message that's wedded to it. You're being rewarded for violence that is divorced from any sense of morality. In other words, gratuitous violence: engaging in violence itself for no other reason than because it's pleasurable. The argument goes, 'Well, we all played cops and robbers, and there's violence in John Wayne movies', and so on. But the violence even in the Terminator movies, for example, is to be engaged in for a moral purpose.

IN A MILITARY sense soldiers are trained when to use force and when not to use it. We've got the Geneva conventions and rules about military mayhem. We've got rules that not only define a just war but also how to wage war. There are things you just don't do. There are very few things that you don't do in a game like Manhunt. So, I think that the problem is that you've got kids who can't necessarily put violence in context by virtue of their tender years. When you feed them the notion that violence is good in and of itself, rather than a regrettable thing that you sometimes

have to engage in to defend yourself or a higher purpose, or whatever, then you're giving a message that is definitely sociopathic."

The message is not only sociopathic but, according to Thompson, downright insulting: "There's a condescension that is almost beyond belief in the New York Times piece I mentioned. Houser said that, and I'm paraphrasing, 'We want to give people games in which they can rather easily engage in the violence, and not make it too difficult, because these people are failures in their lives, and they have enough failure, so we want to give them success in the violence.'"

"Now that, to me, pulls away the veil as if he were the Wizard of Oz. It shows what his attitude is to these people who have given him a nice living, and that is 'you are losers, we are going to take advantage of your loser status, and we're going to give you what we want you to have, and that is murder in a virtual setting that is very easily achieved.' That's not only sadism; that is an elitist view of another human being, which is rather disturbing. The way they market their stuff and the way they treat classes of people, like police and so forth, indicates a dismissal of human kindness, and it's expressed in the games."

It's not just Rockstar's oeuvre that Thompson's worried about, however. He also concedes that, while war games don't carry San Andreas' sociopathic message, he's still irked by them. "They do seem to make war seem cool and fun," he says. "That's

why the military is using America's Army and the Navy SEALs game as recruitment tools. They want to convince teenage boys to join the army because war and the military are 'cool'. But the fact is that to kill has a very horrific psychological cost that's very scarring. And killing, whether it's murder or in the context of a just war, is something to be avoided, in real life and virtual life."

As a result of this, Thompson believes that the result of prolonged exposure to this material by children could be disastrous. "Kids literally process those games in the mid-brain - the medulla, the posterior singulate, and in other parts of the brain that lead to copycatting. And in the MRI scans, you can see these parts of the brain light up - they don't light up in adult brains. There's this neurological deficit that is the scientific basis for the intuitive sense, that any parent has, that kids aren't ready for certain types of entertainment. So that's the scientific basis for what we identify as a problem, and that's why we need to keep kids away from adult material as long as we can."

When Thompson says "adult material", you probably know, by virtue of Hot Coffee, that he's not only talking about violence. More and more, we're seeing pornography – not just sex – pop up in our favourite entertainment medium, to the point where *Playboy* itself feels the need to sponsor a game. How does he feel about this? "I have quite a quaint view of sex," he smiles. "It's the pornographer and the creators of



defence lawyers and employees of GameStop and Best Buy. He outlined his proposal in a very strongly worded manner, challenging "videogame moguls" to "target yourselves as you target others. I dare you". In return, he offered to pay \$10,000 to a charity of Paul Eibeler's choice. Of course, several homebrew games were developed following the proposal, including I'm Ok, a very accurate interpretation of Thompson's proposal by a new company calling itself "Thompsonsoft', which matched every requirement set out in the letter. Thompson then claimed that his proposal was satire and that he would not donate any money to charity – so Penny Arcade's Mike Krahulik donated \$10,000 to the Entertainment Software Association in his name.



#### PIXELANTE

Thompson's lasting legacy to the videogame community is likely to be the term he coined in October 2005: 'pixelante'. Its etymology is fairly obvious – it's a portmanteau of pixel and vigilante. In his letter of complaint to the FBI about the level of email abuse he was getting from the huge number of stupid gamers who decided to fight his accusations with death threats and violent statements, which was forwarded to numerous gaming websites, Thompson officially defined pixelantes as "sociopaths with mouses" and "pimple-faced geeks who are using the First Amendment and freedom of speech in order to threaten me". Intended as a derogatory term for fanatical gamers, it was immediately seized by the community, who turned its meaning around and made it something of a badge of honour – indeed, the anti-defamation and gamer activism organisation Pixelante Nation is named after it. Pixelante t-shirts are available in various incarnations – the one pictured left is the design by Michael Bleigh that won a contest on GamePolitics.com.

# "KILLING IS SOMETHING TO BE AVOIDED, IN REAL LIFE AND VIRTUAL LIFE"

these games who say, incorrectly, that the person whom they would call a prude thinks sex is dirty. I happen to think that sex is wonderful and is not just for procreation, but for pleasure and expression of love. I think sex is fabulous and needs to be treated as an intimate act rather than a public act. These games, as an extension of pornography, also depict sex as something you do to somebody rather than something you share lovingly and tenderly with someone."

Mind you, he freely admits. he's made a mistake in the 'sex and games' area - specifically, his comments on The Sims 2 containing "full-frontal nudity, including nipples, penises, labia, and pubic hair." He acknowledges, "I got some of the facts wrong in my statements about The Sims 2, but here's what I've eventually got right, which is expressive of my concern - and in fact the ESRB now agrees with me. They have warned the industry that, to the extent that you as a developer allow mods to be used on your game, to make available to the public inappropriate material, then you are to be held accountable for that failure or that use of your game in that fashion. Let's say that EA doesn't enforce its copyrights. To the extent that EA encourages and allows people to use the name 'Sims' and to

modify their source code and to come up with mods that Will Wright says he supports. Then, to that extent, they're involved and collaborating in some of the pornographic mods that are out there."

DOES THIS SPELL the demise of the mod industry, you wonder? Fear not, because when we asked Thompson whether he'd be satisfied with some kind of interface being implemented that restricted children from accessing inappropriate mods, he said, quite simply, "Yeah. I think that's in fact what the ESRB has said." So chill, dude. Listen to some Brian Eno and calm down.

In fact, the videogame industry as a whole should probably calm down a little and listen to what Thompson actually has to say. He's not the mad, art-destroying Luddite that we've all made him out to be. In fact, the root of and inspiration for his passion against inappropriate entertainment being sold to children is quite simple: he is a family man. "My son is 13," he says, "so he's right in the age group where kids are interested in this stuff. He does play some of what I would call 'benign' games, and very little. He's seen daddy and what daddy's committed to and I think he accepts it and I think he substantially agrees with it, which is not to say

we don't have a disagreement at the videogame store. But he'd never go to the videogame store without me. I wish more parents would do that."

"By the way, though, th<mark>at's not</mark> the whole answer. The problem is this: I can keep my son away from these games, but I can't keep other people's sons away. When I was on 60 Minutes in 1999 and Ed Bradley asked Joe James (one of the three Paducah victims' sets of parents) 'Isn't it the parents' responsibility?', he looked at Ed with tears in his eyes, and said, 'You know, Ed, I'm trying to figure out what I did wrong. I put my daughter in school and she was in a before-school programme, and if I hadn't raised her right, she'd still be alive today.' So I can keep my kid away from this stuff, but I can't with other kids."

In the end, no matter how you look at it, and no matter how many obscenities you can hurl at his email address, there's no doubt whatsoever that Jack Thompson does have a point. Why are we defending the indefensible? Why are we supporting the Carmageddons over the Grim Fandangos and the Planescape: Torments? We certainly hope there's more to gaming than controversy. A 'get smart' attitude in the industry might actually end up helping it rather than killing it. Plus, if we can segregate adults' and children's titles, then we're allowed much more creative freedom in the former. So, on that note, we have a new term for Thompson to add to the list: concerned father.

#### IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR

# Fallout 3\*

The world has been destroyed by nuclear war, but mankind was clever enough to foresee the tragedy. Pockets of civilisation are locked away in a safe place. Sheltered in a vault for the best part of your life, you are shocked when your father does the unthinkable and leaves the safety of Vault 101 for unknown reasons. Being the possibly good- but probably bad-natured son you are, you also break the strictest of vault laws and pursue him. This is the origin of your protagonist and the rest is yours to tinker with as you see fit.

From birth you choose the features that you'll grow into, your strengths and attributes are determined by reading a typical ABC book and then spending attribute points within it. Finally your Generalised Occupational Aptitude Test - or GOAT exam - cements your characteristics and distributes further attribute points accordingly. When you are grown and equipped with knowledge and the start of a personality, you head out into the broken world to find dad, squinting as you see the sun for the first time.

What lies ahead is a truly immersive experience even if it's not quite the experience that you'd typically yearn for.

This is undoubtedly a tale of woe. A world torn apart by war in the worst possible way and yet still suffering from groups insisting that war with each other is the answer to

everything. In the beginning it's something that draws nothing but repulsion from you as you gladly meet with wandering individuals only to find that, rather than lifting the sensation of loneliness you are starting to feel, they turn out to be nothing but another arm of the multi-limbed problem.

- As time moves on, however, you find yourself tempted by this bleaker side of Fallout 3. Your once-perfect morals become increasingly shaky as you realise the depth and desperation of your situation. There's a reason the strong are picking off the weak in this new, dilapidated world. Resources are slim and this extends to your own inventory and, ultimately, the way in you play.

#### **DETAILS**

FORMAT: Xbox 360 OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC ORIGIN: US PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks DEVELOPER: In-House PRICE: £49.99 RELEASE: 30 October 2008 PLAYERS: 1 ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Ahove: This is likely to be the first town you stumble upon and they seem to worship a live bomb. Seems a little silly to us, who knows what might happen..



**FINGERPR** 

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WORLD AT WAR: The realism and depth of the ruined world is so realistic it's petrifying.

MIXED BAG: Combining shooter, RPG, adventure, and horror, Fallout 3 has something for everyone

> times of dire need. Purchased over the counter from a dodgy barman, these keep you alive mid-mission and don't expose you to the radiation that the local creatures' meat would. A few doses later and you're addicted and suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Your vision becomes partially blurred and you can barely see the nextto-useless shotgun you're so pleased to have stumbled upon. Well, it's actually in

It may begin with a

reliance on drugs to

boost your health in

Right: Trudging through the wasteland can be a lonely experience. Fortunately Raiders and mutated wildlife will frequently come



BETHESDA HAS CREATED A MASTERPIECE. THIS OPEN WORLD PROMPTS YOU TO QUESTION YOUR OWN ACTIONS AND EXACTLY WHAT IS JUSTIFIABLE







#### Q. SO HOW LONG IS IT?

to the main quests, the game won't take a huge amount of time. Ten hours, maybe

## O. THAT'S RUBBISH, SURELY?

Not really, if you're not exploring the wasteland then you're cheating yourself out of one of the best games in years.

#### O. WHAT IF YOU DO EVERYTHING?

time but not nearly



#### VATS ENTERTAINMENT

→ While the combat in Bethesda's previous open-world title did not need to be as perfect. in Fallout 3 it's essential to the game. One of our main areas of concern, therefore, was the developer's approach to gunplay. Fortunately the VATS (Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) helps dramatically when it comes to disposing of foes. Slowing the pace to a standstill and allowing you to pick which area of the body you wish to target while presenting the odds of hitting it turns what could have been the title's weakest element into a triumph. It's yet another win for those clever boys and girls working at Bethesda.



the possession of a corpse, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Theft from gnarled bodies becomes the norm very swiftly, and after the thievery, drug abuse, and scavenging you're only a step away from sending one of the rare friendly faces into a doomed firefight with several mutant brutes, this is so you can reap the rewards, namely the unique weapon from her remains. You have become what you hated.

Of course, you could choose a more humane route and keep your karma high. This will provide its own benefits in the form of companions who refuse to travel with murderers. But the desperation is always there, and the easier, more despicable path that the rest of the world seems to have taken in such a dark time will always nag at you and attempt to draw you downward.

Such a feat of enthralment is very rare from a developer. Bethesda has achieved similar things before but not to this level. This is a very different world from the fantasy realm shown in Oblivion. There's realism to the situation in Fallout 3 that peaks when you stumble upon well-known landmarks. When you consider the warring factions and the battle for natural resources... this is sinister stuff and, as such, grips you.

Many will spot the number at the end of this review and assume that this is a 'perfect' game. It's not. It's merely exceptional and worthy of top marks. There are several bugs present and when traversing rocks - which were obviously placed to hinder a direct approach, we must add - we became

hopelessly stuck twice. On a few occasions enemies falling through floors and clinging to ceilings unnaturally haunted us, but in a game of such scale these things are expected and matter little, if at all. The title's ending leaves you a little empty after an exceptional build, and the fact that once you complete the main quests there's no opportunity to venture back out to explore the vastness you missed out on will cut you down somewhat

■ No matter how much these tiny issues concern you personally there's little dispute that Bethesda has created a masterpiece here and it's a masterpiece that we are regrettably fairly late in informing you about - hence the somewhat detail-free structure of this review. The stats and features of Fallout 3 are now common knowledge to all, but the experience the game delivers to players can still be reinforced and that is our role here. This open world prompts you to question your own actions and exactly what is justifiable.

There are numerous triple-A titles available this Christmas, but if you can afford only one of them, then we guess you know where we'd advise you to spend your money. It'll be the only easy choice you make for a good few days.



#### GROUNDHOG DAY OF THE DEAD

# Dead Rising 2

There are all kinds of different schools of thought as to what a sequel should and should not be. For many, a follow-up should take the foundations of its predecessor and build upon them in new, clever ways while correcting the original's flaws in the process. Others ask far less of developers, content with only minor progression in a few areas or even one major improvement or addition. There aren't so many, though, who could claim that a seguel that does nothing to remedy the common complaints spawned by the first game while retreading the same ground - almost step-for-step - is something that they'd gueue up on day one to buy. But that's precisely what we have here and, while you have to give credit to Blue Castle for mimicking that unmistakable Capcom magic, you do have to wonder if the external team hasn't followed the schematics a little too closely for its own good.

While it's perhaps a trifle unfair to claim that absolutely nothing has changed, we will say that Dead Rising 2 is closer to its predecessor than the GameCube remake of Resident Evil was to the original PlayStation game. It doesn't help matters that Fortune City, the game's take on Las Vegas, feels troublingly like a mall. The good, the bad, the divisive... with few exceptions, it's all familiar fare, as ex-motocross star Chuck Greene steps in for photographer Frank West, who is presumably off busying himself fighting Yattaman and Ryu. The few areas in which Blue Castle does go off-menu all come down to this substitution, waving goodbye to Frank's photojournalism and ushering in new gameplay mechanics thanks to a knack for DIY and an infected daughter. The latter isn't so much a gameplay device as just another reason to return to the safehouse every 24 hours, but since you'll be back that way with survivors in tow far more frequently than that anyway, it's no big deal. The kicker is actually finding the Zombrex that keeps Katey from turning – there's the odd pack scattered about the map or up for grabs in the extortionate pawn shops, but the story-based giveaways can be easily missed if you misuse your time, which will lead to one dead daughter.

Combining weapons is far more novel and, while not every idea that pops into your head will actually work in the game, there's a healthy spread of comical combinations all the same (and one that could quite easily be grown with DLC). Maintenance rooms are

FORMAT: PlayStation 3 OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360 ORIGIN: Canada PUBLISHER: Cancom DEVELOPER: Blue Castle Games PRICE: £39.99 RELEASE: 24 September 2010 PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 online)



up making the game far too easy. Still, grinding as a duo is always going to be preferable to grinding alone... Below: Items like the leaf blower might not be easy to come by, but the rare weapon combinations tend to be the most powerful, rewarding and often amusing of the lot.



B Silly though it was, Frank's camera offered something different for imaginative players. Breaking up the constant slaughter with as sedate a pursuit as photography was a risky but clever dichotomy for Capcom, and we believe it paid off. Unfortunately, Dead Rising 2 has no such diversions. Strapping items together to create ridiculous weapons is amusing, though unlike Frank's hobby, Chuck's handiwork is simply a means to an end - with PP pouring from zombies whenever you use improvised weapons, it's far easier to level-up quickly than it was when progress was fuelled by flash bulbs. But the cost of this speedier advancement is a game that lacks the variety it once had - unless you really get a kick out of dismembering zombies, the joke is going to get old pretty fast...



frequent enough that you'll never curse their absence, but getting the right ingredients for the best gear often involves carrying unwieldy objects some distance. It's worth it though - as those who have seen the likes of firework-

based rocket launchers. inflatable parasols and lethal wheelchairs will attest – and the sizeable PP boosts you get from using them will keep you at it long after the initial novelty has worn off. PP

levels Chuck just as it did Frank though, oddly, a lot of the best moves and abilities are locked away in the progression process. The dodge roll, most notably, didn't unlock for us until reaching the early twenties, making many of the psychopath battles nigh-on-impossible for those that haven't restarted the game with their stored stats at least once.

Yes, the most misunderstood element of Dead Rising returns here (well, perhaps with the exception of the save system, but then that just served to highlight that most gamers need to grow a pair), and expecting to get through the game on your first try is like asking to

be slapped around. Whenever you die or an important story element is missed, you're given the option to start over while keeping your experience and items, and it's an offer we recommend you accept. On our first run, we

walled on every psycho and limped through a few hours, only to have the truth vanish from under our noses - restarting at about level 15 or so, it's a whole different game and, while never easy,

we comfortably saw the majority of Dead Rising 2's content. At a push, we'd say there was slightly less to do than in the original; where once there were decisions to be made about which leads to prioritise, now it seems far more possible to more or less do everything in a single run if you're smart (and punctual) enough.

With such an insane increase in the number of brain-munchers Dead Rising can throw around at once, we shouldn't be too surprised that it's hardly what you'd call a pretty game. It's a fair decision though, since you'll not miss

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ONE STEP FORWARD: It'd be unfair to claim that nothing has changed, but the improvements are minor at best, often fixing problems that didn't exist to begin with, while more pressing issues are ignored.

#### Q. IS THE SAVING SYSTEM STILL BROKEN? No, but it never was to begin with.

Depends what you didn't like about

DEAD RISING

It's still not easy, sure, but you've got three save slots now to help

#### O. WALLING?

Yeah, it happens. In our first playthrough, we accidentally gave ou last dose of Zombrex to a tramp an hour before Katey needed it.

### DEAD RISING 2 IS CLOSER TO ITS PREDECESSOR THAN THE GAMECUBE REMAKE OF RESIDENT EVIL WAS TO THE ORIGINAL PLAYSTATION GAME



ove: Beating up your Terror Is Reality rival is tough but worthwhile - it unlocks bike customisation options and means you've always got a pair of wheels outside. Left: For 360 owners, Case Zero offers sample gameplay for a fraction of the price, but will this have a knock-on effect as gamers get their fix from the truncated download rather than the full game?

that little bit of polish when you're swirling an improvised polearm down a corridor that houses more undead shamblers than you'll ever have seen in one place before. But with so little to do that doesn't involve hacking bits off walking corpses, a lot will hang on how long it takes you to tire of dismemberment. With a decent number of combination options, inquisitive (and twisted) minds should revel in the potential for carnage. But thanks to the stupid psychopath battles (some of which echo those of the original a little too closely for our liking) and some fundamental system decisions, those less easily pleased by clouds of blood and limbs could easily find themselves alienated. Dead Rising 2 is a sequel that tries so hard to appeal to fans of the original that the rest of the gaming world might not find the mass slaughter of zombies quite so appealing. We loved it from start to (stupid) finish, though the many reasons others might not are plain to see and completely understandable.



SO, YOU WANT TO BE A FIGHTER? HERE'S HOW...

# EA Sports MMA\*

Is it a sports game, or a fighting game? It's certainly a sport, and it most certainly involves fighting, but EA Sports MMA doesn't slot comfortably into the finite rule-sets that have defined the 'fighting' genre since Guile first flicked a comb through his giant hair. It may be about two people attacking one another to see who comes out victorious, but like its UFC Undisputed and Fight Night fraternity brothers, it offers an unpredictability and drama that Street Fighter and its ilk cannot replicate.

This new breed of 'non-traditional' fighting games are an interesting bunch, then. The flash knockouts that can end a bout instantly, the vast variety in approaches and outcomes, the lack of classic character balancing... they can be a blessing and a curse. In EA Sports MMA. though, they're unquestionably the former. This is the finest non-traditional fighting game ever made, and another example of the powerhouse that is EA Sports at the peak of its abilities.

It might not have the juggernaut UFC license, but even if you don't know your Melvin Manhoefs from your Mohammed Lawals, EA Sports MMA's fantastic presentation, deep statistics and informative commentary will have you

rooting out favourites in no time. And for the sport'shardcorefollowing, EA Sports MMA is pure fan service. MMA fans are as rabid as net-addicted gamers, frequenting MMA forums, following scores

of fighters' twitters and constantly locked to their blog of choice, and the mix of combatants, arenas, rule sets and ring types are enough to have them grinning from ear to ear.

What EA Sports MMA does best, though, is capture the spirit and essence of Mixed Martial Arts. When broken down, the sport is essentially three things - stand-up fighting (kickboxing), ground fighting (jiu-jitsu/wrestling) and clinch fighting (wrestling/boxing). The team at Tiburon have paid equal attention to all three and how they work with one another. Stand-up is driven by the right stick, in a system EA is calling Total Strike Control. Jabs, hooks and uppercuts are thrown with Fight Night-style sweeps of the analogue, while kicks are activated by tugging the Left Trigger and using the same stick. On a basic level, almost anyone will be able to

#### **DETAILS**

FORMAT: Xbox 360 OTHER FORMATS: PS3 ORIGIN: US PUBLISHER: FA DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon PRICE: £39 99 RELEASE: 19 October 2010 PLAYERS: 1-2 ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: Visually, the game is stunning, but it's the animation that really seals the deal. The fighters move beautifully - never clipping, even during tense grappling exchanges - and the damage modelling is truly superb.



TAKING GAMING ONLINE

CHAMP MANAGER: Win online and compete for championship belts. PAY PER VIEW: The Live Broadcast system could be revolutionary. Real game commentary, shown live around the world.

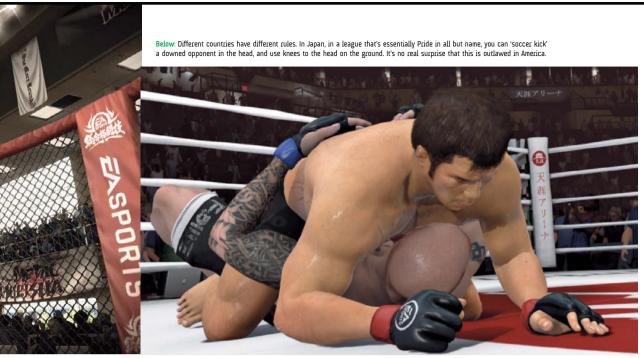
get into the cage or ring and start looping hooks at

their opponents head, and sometimes that's all it takes to win a fight - just watch some C-level

As you evolve, though, you'll begin to throw body punches into your combos, flourish them with leg kicks to restrict your opponents' movements, and begin getting the hang of a subtle parry system that visibly pats strikes out of the air and a 'bob and weave' that dextrous thumb-tweakers can really use to their advantage. The clinch offers fighters the chance

Right: We're keen to test out Live Broadcast, the mode that sees an online fight shown around the world commentary team.

ON A BASIC LEVEL, ALMOST ANYONE WILL BE ABLE TO GET INTO THE CAGE OR RING AND START LOOPING HOOKS AT THEIR OPPONENTS HEAD





#### **FAOs**

### Q. WILL I KNOW ANY OF THE FIGHTERS?

It depends on your love of the sport. You might know a few if you're a casual fan

#### Q. DOES THAT MATTER?

Not hugely. The commentary and stats do a good job of explaining who they all are. You'll soon have your favourites

#### Q. AND WHO'S THE BEST?

Fedor, obviously. Or maybe

#### GROUND AND POUND

Ground fighting is an odd concept, and can be initially baffling to those who don't understand what they're looking at. The game does a great job of explaining the basics, but it's still good to remember that, just because you're on your back, it doesn't necessarily mean you're losing the bout. Having your opponent between your legs and on top of you is known as 'the guard', and is the key position for locking in submissions like armbars and triangle chokes. If you're on top of your opponent, though, you ideally want to be 'mounted', but sitting on their chest. It then becomes a chess game of sorts, where the fighters work to get to their most advantageous position. There's more depth to discover, of course, but if you're an MMA novice, this should help.



to throw vicious Muay Thai knees and elbows, to push an opponent into the fence to cut off their attacking options, or even hurl them to the floor with Greco-Roman slams. And the ground game is a delicate chess match which demands careful stamina control and a PhD in patience. Button bashers will be punished.

.\* The controls are consistent throughout, so the right stick will always throw strikes, while the grappling is left to three buttons: A to advance, B to deny and Y to disengage. Battles for position on the floor (see Ground And Pound) become hugely strategic, as you either work to advance to the mount, or try to deny your opponent from doing the same thing. The pad rumbles as your opponent tries to advance, so if you're defending you must stay calm and wait for the right time to block. Not easy if they're also dropping elbows into your nose.

EA Sports MMA's dramatic fight-finishes are its defining characteristic, though. Flash KOs never feel random, you can see in a replay if you've been caught rushing in or with your hands down, and more often than not they'll see your fighter drop to the canvas with just enough time to try to recover before being rushed and pounded out in one of gaming's most spectacular flourishes of violence. Submissions are equally as effective. They have to be worked for – again, stamina management is key. Wrapping on an armbar to a fresh opponent will result in a tough battle, but doing the same to someone who's sucking wind will normally lead to a guick and satisfying tap-out.

The submission minigames are surprisingly effective, too. There's a stamina-management

game for 'bone' submissions, as one fighter gives everything to finish the hold and the other desperately fights to keep their arm/leg from being hyperextended. Chokes, on the other hand, ask you to find a 'sweet spot' with the analogue. As you get closer to finishing, the colour drains from the screen, sounds become muffled and light fades. Fighters have commented on how realistic it is. We'd happily take their word for it.

Throw in an enjoyable, globe-trotting career mode that pits your created fighter against excellent AI (while you're trained by the ingenious insanity of Bas Rutten) and sees you travel the planet to learn from some of the sports' great trainers and some potentially revolutionary online features, and you're left with a typically robust EA Sports package.

It's those moment-to-moment fights that make EA Sports MMA such an outstanding piece of work, though: the war stories; the moments of unscripted magic; the times when you grab victory from the jaws of defeat; the last-minute submission wins; the 20-minute exhausted brawls that see both men covered in blood and both players shaking hands afterwards. There are gaps to be filled in MMA 2 – expect to see improved wrestling, more ground positions and more strike variety next time – but for now, this is an outstanding example of what a dedicated and passionate team can achieve, even without a killer license. A veritable knock-out.

VERDICT 9/10
THE FINEST 'NON-TRADITIONAL' FIGHTING GAME EVER MADE

#### THE FUTURE IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY: THEY DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THERE

# Homefront

Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery. They also say that talent borrows while genius steals. Both apply to Homefront. Not that its 'genius' is to be found in its tried-and-trusted gameplay mechanics being literally borrowed (or, if you prefer, ripped off) wholesale from Call Of Duty, of course: it's obvious even to the pot plants growing on the rooftop terraces outside Kaos's offices that no self-respecting shooter shall dare deviate from the well-worn left-trigger-right-trigger-theyall-fall-down maxim.

Nope, that was only half of it. Kaos Studios' best decision was to decide that it would steal COD's mechanics to appeal to the Xbox Live crowd, and then imitate Half-Life 2's approach to narrative and environmental design to try and create a hybrid of the two. And it works: not perfectly, but Homefront is an interesting, involving shooter, and is a more satisfying single-player experience than Black Ops, which you may remember as the game with a plot only slightly less lunatic than Homefront's poppolitical update of Red Dawn.

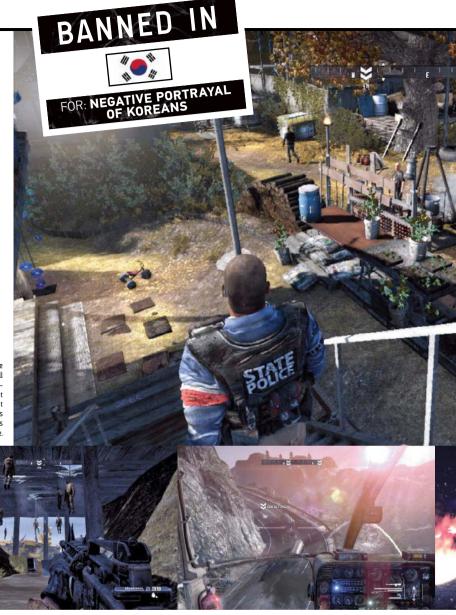
But whereas Black Ops' nonsensical, hokey James Bond shenanigans were cause for a chuckle, Homefront takes itself deadly seriously, and is a better game for it. An oddly affecting, faux rolling news opening sequence sets the tone perfectly, depicting America's slide into ruin between 2011 and 2027, when the game takes place. Savagely dependant on oil and with its military still trapped in Middle Eastern wars, the Land of the Free is there for the taking. Kim Jong Un and his pan-asian Greater Korean Republic duly obliges, and courtesy of a collapsed dollar, one invasion force and an EMP (of course) later the west coast of America is owned by Kim Jong Il's boy. We hope Trey Parker and Matt Stone got out in time.

This is where the player character, Jacobs, comes in. A disaffected former pilot eking out an existence in the walled-in town of Montrose, Colorado, the player's first meaningful act will be to watch atrocities from a slow-moving bus as a kidnapped Jacobs is ferried across town. Families are torn apart, parents are killed in front of their children, death camps are being

#### DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360 OTHER FORMATS: PS3 PC ORIGIN: US PUBLISHER: THO DEVELOPER: Kaos Studios PRICE: £39.99 PFI FASE: 18 March 2011 PI ΔΥΕΡς: 1-32 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

> Right: You'd be hard-pushed to call Homefront a greatlooking game, but there's no denying that its art direction makes up for any shortcomings the tech may have



#### Q. COME ON: ISN'T IT A LITTLE PREPOSTEROUS?

It's a lot preposterous, but that's why it works. *Homefront* is true to its fiction from start to end. which is more than can be said for others in the genre

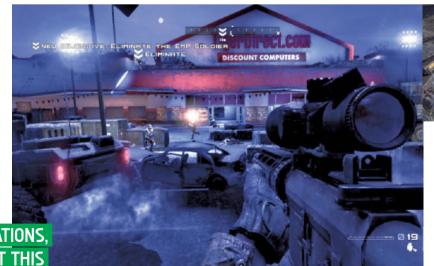
#### Q. OKAY. AND SAID FICTION IS BY JOHN MILIUS?

Yes, but it's more of an echo of his previous work on Red Dawn than nything you'd call 'new'.

#### Q. SO I TAKE IT I CAN LOOK FORWARD TO REFERENCES TO WOLVERINES?

You bet your bottom (worthless) dollar you can, friend.

YOU'RE ALMOST ALWAYS ON THE RUN, SECURING YARDS AND INCHES, NOT NATIONS. AND THE BIG SET-PIECES COMPLEMENT THIS











constructed where schools and hospitals used to be.

Naturally, you're soon freed by a resistance movement who need your aviation skills, and take the fight to the (ridiculously-named) 'Norks' through small town America. Homefront's greatest strength is its smart use of everyday surroundings to convey the terror of an occupying force: you'll fight through converted baseball fields, suburbs and shopping malls and, in a welcome change of pace, get to talk to fellow resistance members for a while in a fortified shanty town.

•• It really does feel like you're a guerrilla fighter running (for the most part) small ops against an intimidating foe, something that is helped immensely by Kaos's decision to make sure you're always on the back foot: ammo is scarce and must be scrounged, and the weapons you use feel powerful, look dirty and

will never be with you for too long. You're almost always on the run, securing yards and inches, not nations, and the big set-pieces complement this.

Sadly, however,

Homefront also boasts jarring flaws to go with its excellent world and solid shooting. For a game that focuses so much on immersion, it's got more HUD elements than Robocop playing Steel Battalion, and it's colossally irritating to see constant screen furniture cluttering your view of this fantastic world. Of greater concern are your squad mates, Connor, Rianna and Hopkins. Rianna is simply dull eye-candy, and Hopkins' ethnicity - Asian American - is something that Kaos should have made more of. Instead, the only thing you'll remember about him is that he wore a hat. These three accompany you throughout the game and have all the charisma of a talking dry Ryvita. Connor is by far the worst: the typical steroidal commanding officer, he's a one-note, oneman profanity engine who can't help but spell out what's happening at all times. Worse still, Connor's leading role means that he heads

up the missions and operates most of the interactive elements in the world... which means you spend a lot of time waiting for him to do things you should be doing. After a while, you'll have waited for him to open so many doors for you you'll feel less like his right-hand man and more like his date.

\*\* Your allies' foibles are also shared by your enemies. Homefront's Korean army is none too bright: popping up from behind cover to get their shot in true whack-a-mole style, they rarely appear to be an elite force. Worse still, for a game with such an interesting setting, there's not a single relatable Korean: they're all reds-under-the-bed bogeymen, and an opportunity for Jacobs to team up with some downed Korean pilots to escape the survivalist ordeal goes sadly begging.

Homefront's biggest problem, however, is its short length: we finished it in just under

five hours, including restarts. Just as it begins to get into its stride it ends, and although there is incentive to play again to pick up newspaper clippings that fill out the wider universe, there

will be players disappointed by the brevity of its engaging but flawed campaign. *Homefront* features an interesting take on multiplayer combat to complement the single-player game, but those that are signing up purely for lone-wolfing should have a think about the value it offers.

Still, there's no doubt that *Homefront* is one of the most interesting shooters of the year, and those tired of *Call Of Duty* could do worse than check this out. Granted, it shares some of that game's ills – no game so heavily influenced couldn't – but its reverence to *Half-Life 2* has given it something that *Call Of Duty* now lacks: a world that feels authentic, even if it should come across as farcically stupid. Which, we suppose, is quite an achievement.



Below: This raid on a supermarket is one of the game's highlights. Not only is it well directed, but it's exploration on the consequences of the desperation of using weaponry banned by the Geneva convention is spot on: it's hard not to feel terrible for both the friendly and hostile units caught in the misfired blast radius of a dreaded white phosphorous explosion as they scream for death



#### **MULTIPLE TANGOS**

dB IF THE MAIN game draws inevitable comparisons with COD, then the multiplayer owes Battlefield its due. Granted, the standard feedback loop of kill-reward-kill-reward is still in effect, but Homefront's spacious maps and commitment to teamwork and vehicles easily marks it out as a game that fits more easily into DICE's mould than Infinity Ward's. Not that developer Kaos has stuck rigidly to the template; it's also added its subtleties to the theatre of online war. Chief among these is the Battle Points system, which rewards players for positive actions by giving them access to higher-tier (and higher cost) unlockables, introducing an element of strategy: spend now, or save? It's engaging, and coupled with the customisation and 32-player battles, it's a recommended alternative to those tiring of Activision's run-and-gun antics.

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

**COMMIE-SERATIONS:** While its depiction of American desolation is commendable, *Homefront* would do well to bring some more sympathetic traits to its enemies as well.

#### T&A RPG FTW

# The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SEEING RED: Assassins Of Kings uses CD Projekt's

internally developed RED Engine to bring its world to

life. But if you want to run the highest settings then

you'll need a worthy graphics card.

Playing an RPG is all about making tough decisions. Do you choose the brutality of the barbarian warrior or the magic of the elven sorceress? Do you pool all your experience points into the fireball spell or go with elemental diversity? Do you blow all your gold on a bronze broadsword to replace your rusty rapier, or do you stick with it for a few more quests knowing that a couple more wolf pelts is all that stands between you and the futureproof assurance of the mithril mace? Each decision will change the gameplay experience on some level, but, in terms of the all-important story, the choices we make are often polarised between serene saint and sadistic sinner.

The Witcher was an RPG that moved away from this linguistic linearity, as rather than

a conventional world of morally one-sided conflicts with distinct villains and victims, every NPC had a complex story that helped justify their actions. The game thrust you into battles where

both sides had a convincing argument; with only fragments of the truth being apparent at any given time, blood spilt in the name of perceived justice could have serious ramifications in the long run. It was a dark fantasy that concealed human emotion behind its veil of mythical races

But this wasn't some random act of narrative brilliance, as The Witcher's story was a continuation of a bestselling fantasy series. These novels chronicled the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a Witcher who hunts monsters thanks to the rigorous training and enhancements he received as a child. These ordeals gave Geralt his albino appearance, and abilities including heightened speed, strength and regeneration. The Geralt in the books also followed his own ethical code, something which the first game explored throughout its morally distorted chapters.

At the first game's conclusion (spoiler alert if you haven't played it), Geralt saved the King of Temeria from an assassination attempt in an epic and bloody cut-scene, but in a cliffhanger twist, the would-be king slayer was revealed to be a yellow-eyed Witcher. The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings takes place a few months later. The Prologue describes how a second assassin achieved what the first one didn't and with Geralt being pinned as the prime suspect, the White Wolf is jailed for regicide. But being the resourceful man he is, Geralt isn't incarcerated for long, and what follows is a quest for answers - and, if the player chooses, revenge.

■ To discuss the plot any further would detract from an outstanding piece of storytelling that demands a spoiler-free experience from start to finish. It's safe to say that Geralt meets many

> familiar faces on his journey; with dialogue that's steeped in no stalgia, it helps if you've played the first game. Not knowing the history isn't a barrier for series newcomers; it's just if you don't know your

Salamandras from your Squirrels, then the finer references will fall on deaf ears.

What's instantly comprehensible, however, is the quality of spoken narrative and the moral dilemmas you are forced to navigate. The character of Geralt is a legend within his own lifetime, but as a Witcher with heavy scarring, he's often shunned by human society. This lets him empathise with the elves and dwarves who have become second-class citizens after many years of human oppression, but while Geralt begins this journey from a point of neutrality, the player's decisions will determine his role as the tension between races and classes boils over.

Assassins Of Kings expands upon The Witcher's non-linearity by presenting the player with dialogue choices that are less about right and wrong and more about forging allegiances based on your own ideals. One example sees Geralt caught in a melee between three opposing leaders. One leader has drawn out the second by letting Geralt restrain him in a



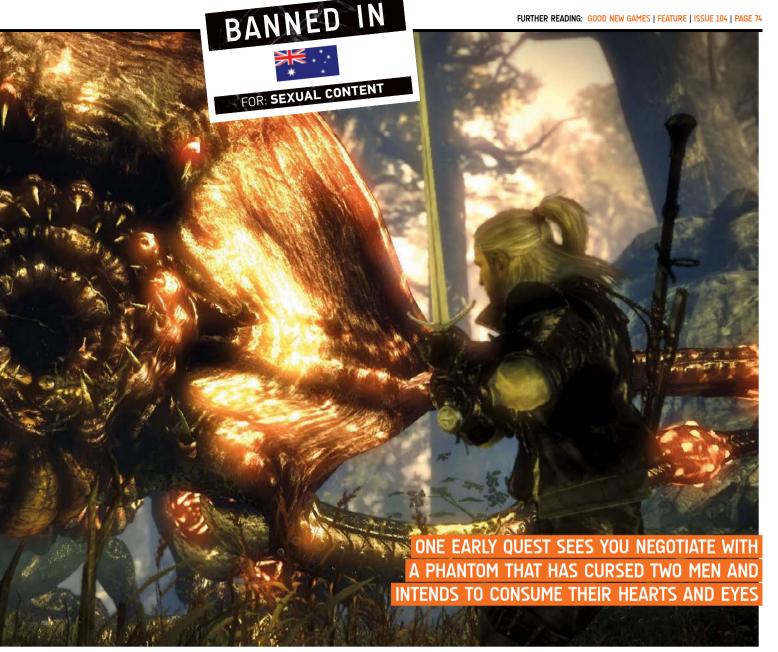
Above: In addition to body parts like eyes and teeth, looting a corpse will bag you different types of Mutagens that can be linked to a Talent to beneficial effect.







Above: By registering The Witcher 2 online you get a new quest called Troll Trouble, suggesting that CD Projekt will be supporting Assassins Of Kings with future expansions.





#### WRESTLE MANIA

₿ In the first game, the best way to make a bundle of cash was to dabble in a game of dice poker. This works much the same as traditional poker except that flushes are removed from the equation. Dice poker returns in The Witcher 2 along with a pair of less methodical pursuits. The first is good old-fashioned arm wrestling, whereby Geralt tests his might against drunken peasants and burly dwarves. To win you have to keep your cool in a sliding scale minigame. The other distraction is bare knuckle brawling. This uses QTE prompts to make Geralt dodge strikes while landing punches and head-butts. Anyone who has finished a Guitar Hero song on easy will breeze through these one-on-ones with ease.

### THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



You've sat through the opening sequence and are making your way through Geralt's first flashback. You'll soon find yourself bumping into a familiar assassin in a white robe near some haystacks.

10 HOURS



That's the first chapter completed and you're about to leave the first town in hot pursuit of the king-slayer. An ugly monster you meet also makes for a surprisingly ashionable jacket.

4 (SOLID) DAYS



 Having ploughed through every side-quest there is to find, you have finally finished the game. The end boss was easier than you expected, but not because you had the best sword and armour.



Below: The inventory system is clear and concise. CD Projekt RED could certainly teach other RPG developers a thing or two.

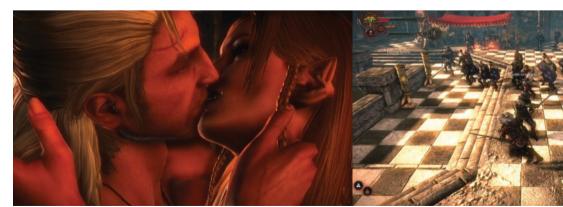




Above: By reading certain books you can improve your knowledge on the various enemy types. Swatting up also confers damage bonuses.

#### **SEX OFF THE CARDS**

→ One of the lasting impressions of the original Witcher was its free-spirited attitude towards sex. Geralt is a sterile mutant who is immune to disease and has spent a lifetime in battle. So in that respect, you can't really blame the guy for being a bit triggerhappy. But the Sex Cards you collected for successfully seducing women, gotta catch 'em all-style, were a tad juvenile. The Witcher 2 does away with the cardboard and approaches the intimate moments with more maturity. It's still about cheeky foreplay with elven wenches rather than a Jane Austen love affair, but by conveying the impulses behind Geralt's very human actions, the brief moments of partial nudity feel more natural and less cringeworthy.





#### FAOs

Q. WHERE IS YENNEFER? Geralt is still searching for the women he lost to The Wild Hunt, but that's all we're prepared

#### Q. DO YOU GET TO SEE SOME BREASTS?

Not so much. Geralt isn't a fan of metal breastplates and seems to prefer loose fitting leather for added devterity

#### Q. NO, THE OTHER BREASTS!

Ohhhhh... well, yes. This is The

cunning ruse. But the third leader, who helped Geralt earlier in the story, shows up unexpectedly and is out for the blood of the other two. The restrained leader then breaks free of his bonds and asks Geralt for his sword. You have a few seconds to make a decision before engaging the second leader – who has been your target from the start. But handing the sword over, or keeping it, will have a negative effect for one of your allies.

\*\*The game is full of situations that challenge the archetype you're trying to play, and, with 16 possible endings compared to the first game's three, the extent of how the story can change is more significant. It still comes down to branching pathways at set intervals, but, by forcing the player to make difficult choices, *The Witcher 2* effortlessly immerses you within its non-linear narrative. And while the dialogue keeps its brazen demeanour with 'f' and 'c' words spouted liberally, this sequel handles them with more maturity, though it's still a long way from finishing school graduation.

The original Witcher was a marathon that spanned five large chapters with a long list of distractions. In comparison, The Witcher 2 is a more condensed experience that tells its story across three equally epic acts. Each takes place within a beautifully realised town and a surrounding landscape. But while the forests and valleys initially convey a sense of grandeur, you'll quickly discover their limits. Indeed, The Witcher 2 trades its predecessor's expansiveness for accessibility and lavish graphics that breathe life into every character and location, and although this comes handin-hand with a reduction in side-quests, it's a shift to quality rather than quantity.

once you discover the ghost's motives, it's hard not to sympathise.

Geralt is a methodical man who can talk his way out of peculiar situations but, if the player chooses, resorting to violence is always an option. Combat focuses on the two swords that Geralt carries with him at all times, and while a peasant girl suggests it's because he has a tendency to lose them, they actually serve a dual (and duel) purpose. Steel Swords are the preferred means for dispatching human opponents while Silver Swords are better for taking down anything that would look out of place in the local tavern.

You have to equip the right sword for the right situation, but because there's no overlap between the normal and paranormal encounters this is never really an issue. Swordplay

consists of a Fast and Strong Attack, a defensive Dodge and Block, and the ability to throw knives and bombs. It's a system that's less demanding than the previous game and removes both the strict combo timing and separate fighting styles. The levelling system has also been streamlined

Rather than arduously grinding for levels, the bulk of your experience comes from completing quests; with a set price for every consecutive level, your number is a reflection on how far you've progressed through the story rather than how many beasts you've put on the endangered species list. Each level-up nets you a single Talent point and, with Attribute management now

# fireball while Axii converts an enemy into a temporary sidekick. It can also be used during a conversation to convince a guard that these aren't the dryads he's looking for.

The simplest way to gain an advantage in combat is to buy better equipment. A variety of weapons and armour are available in the town stores, but the best gear – much as you'd expect – is earned through questing and crafting. Bludgeon your way through hordes of enemies while upturning every crate and cupboard along the way and you'll amass a stockpile of crafting components. These can be carted off to the local smithy and fashioned

into serrated swords with fancy names and hooded jackets that shrug off the effects of giant spider venom.

The best of these garments will see you through the dramatic

boss battles and, although they are few in number, they make for an impressive trio of set-pieces. Downing each boss requires you to ace a QTE test, and if you happen to left-click when you should've right-clicked then you'll have to start from the beginning. However, for those who'd rather use a keyboard for word processing, CD Projekt has included a pad-based control scheme that makes full use of the Xbox 360 controller. The game even changes the onscreen button prompts to letters that are painted in familiar colours.

As a follow-up to a hardcore classic, *The Witcher 2* retains the distinctive charm of the original while trimming back the excess. Its combat system isn't as complicated and its world isn't as open-ended. This could read like a list of negatives on paper, but, in execution, these cuts have produced a fantasy adventure that feels focused and significantly more polished. And compared to its recent rivals, *Assassins Of Kings* has handled the jump to greater accessibility with more finesse.

If we have to make a criticism, it's that *The Witcher 2* leaves you wanting more than it offers. A 40-hour completion time isn't anything to sniff at, but this includes most of the side-quests, and it can't avoid comparisons to the epics of BioWare and Bethesda. However, this is overshadowed by a deeply engaging story that offers thought-provoking choices few games can match. The epilogue will open up more questions than it answers, but when you look back at the decisions you made to reach your destination, it's clear that this journey was its own reward.



### **FINGERPRINT**

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PROVERBIAL CHEESE: If you set traps than you'll have to bait them with an appropriate lure. HIDER CUP: Trophies are gained from killing large monsters and can be worn for various effects.

# YOUR LEVEL IS A REFLECTION ON HOW FAR YOU'VE PROGRESSED THROUGH THE STORY RATHER THAN HOW MANY BEASTS YOU'VE MADE ENDANGERED SPECIES



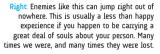
The basic quests are posted on notice-boards and make use of Geralt's monster-hunting credentials. The bounties start off small, with own-brand beasties like the returning Nekker imps and Endrega lizards, before introducing classic creatures like Wraiths and Harpies. The more freeform quests are discovered in the time-honoured tradition of talking to anyone who looks vaguely interesting, and range from sabotage and extortion missions to murder investigations and diplomatic discussions with sentient non-humans. One early quest sees you negotiating with a phantom that has cursed two men and intends to consume their hearts and eyes, but

stripped out entirely, character development is handled solely through the Talent trees. These govern Geralt's affinity with the various Witcher arts and are split between Training, Swordsmanship, Alchemy and Magic.

Alchemy ties into Geralt's ability to use herbs and monster parts to concoct potions that, if consumed before a battle, will confer useful bonuses. The formulae can be bought from the various shops and range from enhancing Geralt's night vision to improving his resistance to fire and poison. Magic is the alternative to hitting everything with a sword, and five of the six Witcher Signs (spells) are useable from the get-go. Igni is the traditional

#### **INDICTED**

 $_{\mbox{\scriptsize of}}$  After ringing the bell at the top of the tower, a new NPC appears on the bottom floor of the belfry. What he sells are indictments, for 48,000 souls each. The fun that can be had in playing with others is not strictly limited to invading worlds and leaving messages. Indictments appear to be a punishment that players can place on griefers. So, say you're level 20 and a level 60 player wanders into your world and kills you, there's no getting him back, probably ever, because said high-level player will either always be more powerful, or will have stopped playing by the time the low-level player has levelled up. Indictments, at a high price, appear to allow lower-level players to exact their vengeance, though we did not have the chance to test this in our review build.







#### DEATH. AS PROMISED

## Dark Souls\*

#### DETAIL

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: From Software
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 30 October 2011
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





DEMON'S SOULS

Below: The bell towers, 'one above, one below' as an NPC at the start of the game informs us, are guarded by one of these: a stone Gargoyle. At least, you'll think it's one until his friend turns up and you realise you don't have a hope.



Above: This armoured rhino thing is one of the less challenging mini-bosses in the game. Forcing him to stand in fire, run at walls or succumb to magic is fairly easy. Just don't let him do what is pictured here. No. no. Bad.

Genre fantasy is stuck in a rut. From Lord Of The Rings to Game Of Thrones, things haven't changed in any measurable way for well over sixty years. Giant, langurious lizards still mark the upper echelon of higher beast, pug-faced, greenskinned horrors still mass in hordes of all that

echelon of higher beast, pug-faced, greenskinned horrors still mass in hordes of all that is wicked and ungodly, and fair-haired, sharpeared immortals still croon piously about the ills of the blighted forest. It's not, of course, due to any lack of original thought, but more that the publishing industry – books, films and games – knows that this formula sells. So why change it?

By all rights, a Japanese take on the Western RPG should be in every way as bad as Bungie taking on the next *Final Fantasy* – about as appealing as gravy and phleam. In 2009, From

Software set out to prove that, rather than mash together the norms and conventions of two very different videogame cultures, it could instead, with intelligence and a delicate touch, capitalise

on the accord of classic Western fantasy, while sprinkling the final product with a liberal quantity of Eastern quirk.

The upshot was Demon's Souls which, for those who require a brief tow to come to speed, was an epic Western-style RPG, flowing with a deep and ferocious undercurrent of Japanese absurdity. From its central hub, you would enter a number of steadily unlocked worlds, each with its own theme and atmosphere. The aim was to return to said hub with a large number of souls harvested from the bodies of fallen enemies and use them to level your character, thereby unlocking the ability to take on greater challenges; new stages punctuated by ever more fearsome denizens. Upon death, any souls carried were lost, unless you could work your way back to the spot you died and retrieve them. Failing that, accumulated souls were lost permanently, often killing whole hours of progress in a single, hollow moment.

To Demon's Souls, and equally to Dark Souls, punishment was and is central to its gameplay philosophy. A single minor enemy is capable of taking out even highly levelled players, should they become complacent and mistime the raising of their shield, or opt for a heavy attack during a window too narrow to accommodate their lumbering back-swing. Demon's Souls was hard - a fact for which it was both critically applauded and enjoyed substantial limelight as poster-boy of the true gaming hardcore; a champion to those who lament modern gaming's proclivity for limp, guided experiences. It was pure videogame mojo - a little blue pill for the appetites of the iaded generation.

Dark Souls' strapline proudly states 'You will die'. We were worried that From Software

had come to the errant conclusion that it was Demon's Souls' crushing difficulty that led to the bonanza of perfect scores and widespread kudos among gamers that it rightfully received.

Because if difficulty were the sole facet on which critical success were balanced, there are any number of broken games out there that should have reviewed better. Just take a look at *Ninja Gaiden*, for example; a crushingly difficult game whose plaudits were justified because it was also never less than fair. Its sequel saw Team Ninja focus so much on that one aspect of its design that it lost every bit of its poise.

• To follow in those footsteps would mean failure on the part of From Software to understand that which it had created – that Demon's Souls was an aberration whose masterful execution was little more than a happy accident. Marketing, it turns out, is one thing, whereas a unique mastery of videogame design is another. Dark Souls, like its predecessor, is not a game that relies solely on its difficulty.

THERE IS NO OTHER VIDEOGAME ON THE PLANET
THAT ACHIEVES A GREATER SENSE OF PLACE, NOR
SWELLS SO EFFECTIVELY WITH FEAR AND LONELINESS

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

one that no longer relies on the ancient mechanics of hub-based exploration. It may not sound like much

NO MORE HUB: Dark Souls' layout is an organic

but in practice it's as unique as it is elegant.

### TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

#### THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

5 MINS



∩ Those skellies are going to hurt you. Any attempt to take the low road throughout the entire game will be impeded and often stopped altogether by these tricky foes.

3 HULIDS



O The wonders of the sewer system are less than that; a place filled to the brim with faecal parasites, belching frog creatures and giant. disease-carrying rats.



O This is one of many boss creatures whose challenge remains insurmountable even after many, many hours of play Dark Souls is an ideal game for the unemployed.

> an hour travelling from. But there is a devious penalty; each time you rest, every enemy in the game except its bosses returns to life and will need to be killed again. And again. And again.

Your character, custom made from any of several archetypes, will be undead most of the time as a result of his or her repeated death. As well as souls, enemies occasionally drop 'Humanity'. This can be used to 'Reverse Hollowing' - a way to leave your undead form and become once again human until such time as you die. That's usually not very long, and so this in itself isn't particularly useful. However,

should you be human and own additional humanity, you can kindle the flame of any campfire, which will provide you with ten Estus charges rather than five whenever you respawn there -

a significant leg-up in your plight to reach the next

Dark Souls is anything but linear, and its lack of a separate hub proves no obstacle to the genius way in which the world's layout develops every alley, passageway, ladder and doorway to open up whole new unexplored,

■ Indeed, it is exploration that is most central to the Dark Souls experience. There are few games that encourage more relish for getting past the next boss, or finally obtaining

Below: Kindling a campfire is truly the way forward in the game. Ten health charges is better than five. They are, however, few and far between.





→ Like Demon's Souls, each new type of enemy encountered presents its own particular set of problems for the player. Skeletons, for example, won't die if there is a necromancer anywhere within half a dungeon instead reforming and re-engaging you. To solve this problem, it behooves you to lure them to a deep, dark hole and push them in. This tactic worked fantastically well for a while until we finally made it all the way to the end of the dungeon and found all of our supposedly 'dead' skellies just, like, hanging out, Insta-death, Figuring out how to handle each new denizen is one of Dark Souls' greatest joys.

Where stereotypical Western fantasy RPGs such as Dragon Age: Origins employ rousing orchestral scores and battlefields alive with the scuttling of rusted armour to inject changes of pace, Dark Souls is an experience of such delicate subtlety that the changing of a single piece of armour, and the new sound and gait that results, has a tangible effect on the way you perceive your character's place in the world. It is just you and the wind, and we can honestly say that, besides Demon's Souls, there is no other videogame on the planet that achieves a

greater sense of place, nor swells so effectively with feelings of fear and loneliness.

There is no central hub - no safe area from which to base your expeditions into the

unknown. Instead there are campfires littered throughout, the first of which serves as a kind of launching point, with characters you meet or rescue along the way making their way back there to serve as vendors and trainers. Throughout the rest of the world, campfires are few and far between, and reaching them is the only means of true progress. At each, players can rest, thereby regaining the contents of their Estus Flask - a five-charge health replenishment vessel. Resting will also mean you respawn from that campfire as opposed to, say, the one you've just spent half



shadowy realms.

FINGERPRIN'

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ATMOSPHERE: Nothing but you, the wind and the

Women's Institute to take first prize in a bake-off.

howling of things that want to kill you. You could slice the atmosphere with a knife, then serve it to the



Left: The Undead Burg is where you'll be spending a lot of time during your first ten hours. Its verticality is unmatched anywhere else in the game. Vertigo is only worsened by actually falling off things.

Right: The Valley Of Drakes is a nightmarish place you'll find a long, long way into the game. Even at our advanced level, we were unable to kill even one of these blue bastards.





Left This giant sewer rat is fairly easy to beat. Standing in front of him like this, though, is absolutely not the right way to go about it. Like Demon's Souls before it, tricking the Al and staying safe is key to any and all progress.

the key to that innocuous-looking door the player has passed six hundred times while toing and froing elsewhere. And when those bosses are slain and doors are opened, it never disappoints. What may look a cupboard-sized room from the outside contains a ladder, which leads down to several sets of stairs and onward through underground passages to where it opens out into vast valleys filled with varieties of fiend far beyond our current abilities. *Dark Souls* is a compendium of places such of these, and through repetition, how each links up with the other is burned indelibly into the player's mental map.

Dark Souls is a game of loneliness, of isolation. But there are occasionally folks you'll meet along the way, some friendly, most indifferent, and through them you'll gain access to additional spells, items, weapons and upgrades. The latter requires you find either a blacksmith, or acquire the necessary items to strengthen your weapons by your own hand. Titanite shards, a fairly uncommon component looted from the corpses of your vanquished enemies, are used to strengthen weapons. A Battle Axe, say, becomes 'Battle Axe+1', and so on all the way up to level five.

Above: This chap here will train you in the use of pyromancy. Being that we chose pyromancer as our character class, he came in really rather handy.

#### FAN<

#### Q. WILL I DIE?

Yes, you will die hundreds and hundreds of times over; most often from the two skeletons right near the start.

#### Q. WILL IT HURT?

Yes. Losing souls is one of the most painful gaming experiences imaginable. Just as well the rewards are equally satisfying.

#### Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

Considering how utterly punishing it is, you could play it non-stop for a year and still not scratch the surface. We hope that answers that.

PURE VIDEOGAME MOJO – A LITTLE
BLUE PILL FOR THE APPETITES OF
THE JADED GENERATION

At level five another, insanely rare component that may only be looted from a boss, can be used to 'Ascend' the weapon to the next level.

The levelling of yourself, your weapons, your armour and your magic are all vital to progress. You are at war with the world of Dark Souls and everything in it, and, make no mistake, it's a war of attrition – an arms race. It's quite possible to have a dozen ways forward at any one time, but equally possible that one – or less – of those are within your current abilities. Grinding – kill group of enemies, return to campfire, rinse, repeat – is sometimes the only way to proceed. Whether or not this bothers you really is down to a matter of taste.

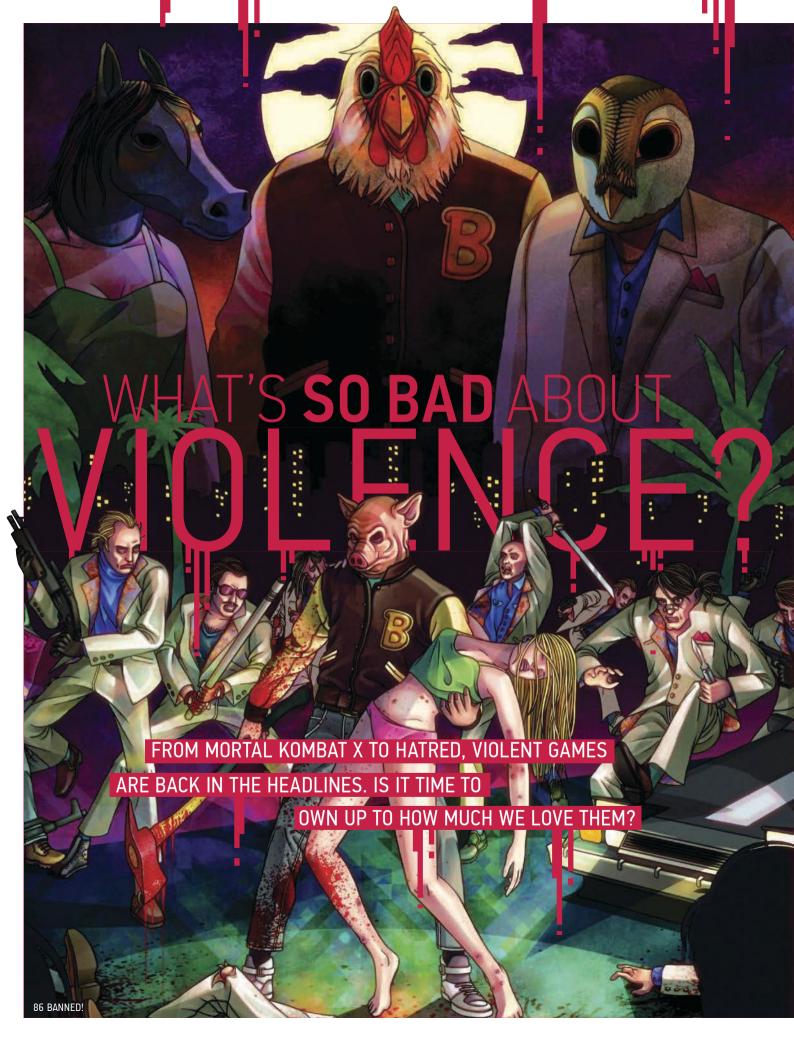
Dark Souls' online features, in a far more substantial way than those of Demon's Souls, are vital to player enjoyment. For those unfamiliar with the way the online component works, messages can be left on the ground for the benefit of other players. Messages such as 'You can run past this dragon, but it may take many deaths to do so'. Without the help of such philanthropy from fellow adventurers, players could easily find themselves stuck at regular intervals with no obvious means to proceed. With the console attached to an internet connection, however - when the spirits of the gaming community mingle in the ether and their legacies overlap - this issue simply ceases to exist.

It highlights a universal truth about the world of *Dark Souls*; that one could never

accuse it of wasting an opportunity to punish you. How lurking from every shadow, instadeath arrives with neither pomp nor preamble. How the game's architectural structure is designed deliberately to lead you to believe you have happened upon an impasse. Or how Dark Souls distributes its barriers, both in the form of powerful enemies and locked doors, meaning that linearity isn't an option even if plundering on to the next campfire is all you really want to do.

To make any final judgment as to whether Dark Souls is the equal, or even the better. of its forebear is a subjective one. The same ideas are spun out in near-identical fashion. Its eschewing of a somewhat cumbersome hub in favour of an organically flowing world should rightfully be commended as a step forward. That the majority of its gameplay hasn't changed while the inflation of expectation in the wider world marches on means that if anything, some aspects have taken a small step backwards. Either way, Dark Souls is a fine example of how great forethought and a less-than-tepid attitude towards taking risks pay dividends in the hands of real gamers. It is nothing short of extraordinary, though perhaps, a couple of years on from Demon's Souls, it is also less surprising.





e love violent

games. There's no point in trying to deny it. They've formed the backbone of our favourite gaming experiences over the last couple of decades. From the moment blood and gore could be depicted in pixelated form, we've lapped them up (if you'll forgive the rather gruesome image). They may be attacked and maligned and often used as the scapegoats of all our ills, but we have no shame in admitting our adoration.

If simply proclaiming this affection isn't enough for you and you would appreciate some proof of love then look no further than the 14 games that have had the privilege of being marked ten out of ten by games™ in our 13 years. We would suggest that more than half of them are renowned, perhaps even infamous, for their graphic content. It may not have been the single reason why we loved them, but it certainly didn't appear to hurt our assessment.

"Human beings live for fantasy," asserts Running With Scissors CEO, Vince Desi. "Imagining oneself as a hero, a lover, a killer, all go hand in hand with fame, fortune and fantasy. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we acted out all our fantasies? Thank God humans can fantasise as a way of exercising their desires and satisfying their emotions." And as one of the people behind the *Postal* series, he would know better than most. There's an important escapism to be found in playing games. We often hear people saying that they find *Call Of Duty* or *GTA* relaxing as they can comfortably expel frustration or anger in a healthy way.

But they're not always viewed that way. The most recent controversy surrounding a violent game came from *Hatred* by Destructive Creations. As a dark, violent and seemingly rather cynical game where you play as a mass murderer, it didn't take long before it drew negative attention from the mainstream press. Perhaps what was most unique about the controversy, though, was that it seemed to split the gaming community in a way few games prior had done. Many seemed discomfited with the setting and gameplay of *Hatred*'s first trailer and it had even staunch defenders of gaming asking, 'Have we gone too far?'.

"The violence itself isn't any more exaggerated than in many games you play, it's just the way of telling what we want to tell," Destructive Creations CEO Jarosław Zieliński insists to us. "It is a game about a mass-murderer, so violence is inevitable." And despite that, Zieliński was surprised

by the reaction. "I knew that it would make some noise and would bring some attention, but I never dreamed that it would reach such a big scale," he reveals. "Our game was covered in gaming press and major media such as Forbes, The Guardian, The Sun, etc. That's unbelievable to realise, because so far we are a small and unknown development team from nowhere."

What followed was a melodrama of attack and defence as the game was chastised by gamers, then defended, pulled from Steam Greenlight and then reinstated with an apology from Gabe Newell, "We are grateful to our supporters, fans and anyone who made it available on Steam in so short a time," Zieliński adds. "That means that adult gamers do need such gaming, they want to play *Hatred*, they want to support independent developers, because they feel that our game is more honest and fun than many titles they have played recently. And an honourable mention: Gabe equals GOD!"

That suggestion of being more honest is an interesting one and something that chimed with the thinking of Rebellion, makers of the *Sniper Elite* and *Zombie Army Trilogy* games who have pioneered the x-ray bullet cam. In some ways the interactivity of games means greater consequence can be portrayed with violence. "I think there is another debate to be had about how [violence] stands in the



• Hatred is about mass murder. It's not hiding that fact, but it has still stirred up a lot of feelings. When the game releases it's likely to see a second storm emerge.

game and how it is portrayed and whether it is gratuitous," begins Rebellion CEO and creative director Jason Kingslev.

> "Do you educate the player: 'This is exactly what a bullet does to the human body, and it's pretty horrible'? It's the complete opposite approach to the 'dinnertime TV shows' where people are using automatic rifles and people fall down, there's no blood and no bits, nothing happens to them."

Consequence and context can be important then and most games have some level of justification for their violent content. It may be overblown to the point of gratuity, but it originated from a deliberate intent of some kind. It's often when that context is removed for some reason (with violence depicted in a trailer, a short demo for promotional purposes or deliberately isolated in support of a particular agenda) that games get in the most trouble. "If you're not able to provide the full context to people who are critical reviewers of it. it can leave you exposed to 'I played this game and I saw something that was out of context and was jarred and it's left me feeling a little bit uncomfortable'," Devolver Digital's Graeme Struthers admits to us. It was something he and Dennaton Games experienced first hand recently with Hotline Miami 2 and an implied rape scene in the game.

"Yeah, that's probably the best example we've had ourselves. From the gamemakers' point of view, they wanted people to experience the entire game and make their own decisions about how they felt rather that this small segment of the game. And looking back I think it was a misstep that we should have thought about because it was there without context and that led to some people feeling uncomfortable. I can understand that as well. It wasn't something where we thought 'How can you possibly



setting to be gratuitous, it's not that different in themes from Hotline Miami today



• Mortal Kombat seems to take pride in how far it can push its fatalities. The latest killer moves in Mortal Kombat X are a great example of this.

feel like that?'. As soon as that got said, we realised that there was actually no context to this particular part of the game. Hopefully now that the game is out, that context is there and people can see it the full picture." The scene itself is framed like the rest of the game as if it's all being portrayed by actors, so just before the awful assault appears to be happening a director calls cut and the scene ends. In the broader context of the horrible scenes the game references as part of a commentary on violence in media, it may not be so jarring, but on its own, many had difficulty with it.

esi agrees that context is very important. "In Postal, we want the gamer to experience an over-the-top totally ridiculous sensation of fantasy. How many aliens, people, soldiers, or zombies is the right amount to kill in a game? More important than the numbers is the context. Does a sex scene in a movie require full nudity? No, it's a matter of perspective. The game developer like the filmmaker or author is trying to convey an effect. Extreme emotions are expressed differently than subtle passive reflections."

And that's really the most important point. Violence in and of itself isn't a reason to play or enjoy a game. But when it's done right, it adds substantial flavour. Were those ten out of ten games only great because of the blood and gore? Of course not. But their presence was a signifier of a more mature, open-minded approach to content, much as Devolver takes when publishing a game. "It's hard for me to step back and look at the range of games we're involved in and look at it from the point of view of what style we have, but we don't shy away from it either," Struthers explains. "If the game creator, in the case of Dennis [Wedin] and Jonatan [Söderström, makers of Hotline Miami], if that's the game they make, we have no editorial view on that. We just love the game they're making. I never really understood the



That's what Turkey's been asking

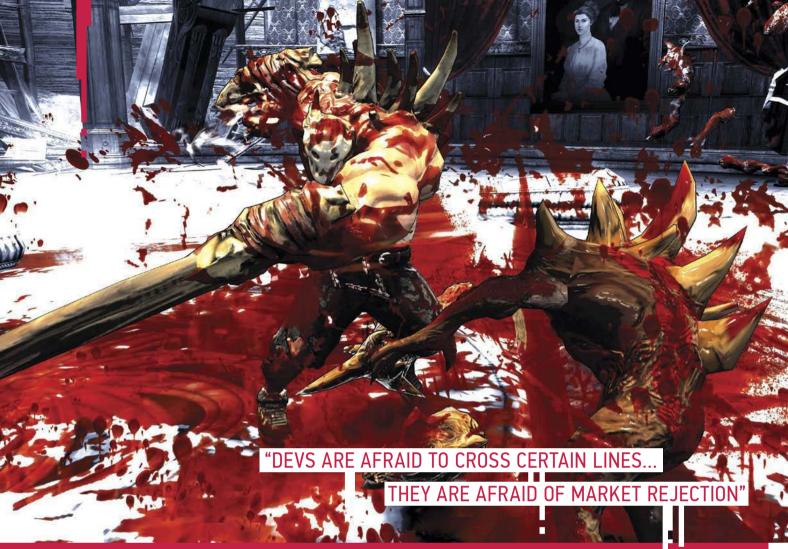


One interesting violent game controversy you may have missed in recent weeks is that Turkey is investigating the possibility of banning Minecraft for sale to children on the grounds that it promotes violence. That's what the nation's Family and Social Policies Ministry is proposing in a report which says: "Although the game can be seen as encouraging creativity in children by letting them build houses, farmlands and bridges, mobs [hostile creatures] must be killed in order to protect these structures. In short, the game is based on violence."

At the time of going to press the courts are still to make a ruling on this recommendation, but it's a fascinating story and draws an interesting new line for what should be considered 'too much' aggressive content for children. Mojang, for its part, has recommended playing in peaceful and creative modes.







Much like its predecessor, the Splatterhouse reboot revelled in its violent content, spraying blood as far across floors and up walls as it possibly could.

Daily Mail-esque debate about games. It's always struck me as very low-hanging fruit to go after that issue and make out games are bad. I just don't agree with that."

And that's been the position of most gamers when it comes to conversations of violence; we go on the defensive. In fact, some of the developers we reached out to for this discussion bowed out because they didn't want to be drawn into that lowhanging argument. There's a tendency for everyone to end up with mud on them "There is an ongoing debate and overall it is something for the industry to consider," Kingsley admits to is. "It's also down to your audience: are you making an 18-plus rated game? Then I guess it's down to creativity and what sort of story you want to tell, like you would in a movie or a book. If you wanted to make it for a younger audience? Those under 18? Then you have a different set of parameters that you have to bring into play. We are very comfortable in the 18-plus horror genre, very firmly in that area, It comes down to what we as game creators feel is okay. Some will disagree. Some will think our game is too gory, but they have the right to think that."

Which begs the question, is there anything games shouldn't be allowed to depict? "'Allowed' implies permission and that in itself speaks to freedom of expression," Desi tells us. "Game technology should break technical boundaries but not concern itself with content. Creativity is rooted in the human



 GTA remains controversial; its sales make it easily the most high-profile adult gaming experience around.

spirit and it's not something that can be 'programmed' for the sake of commercial gain. That said, humans are greedy, so we should always expect and not be surprised by business decisions that take the cheap shot at success."

For Destructive Creations, it's a question of fear. "Most devs are afraid to cross certain lines, because they are afraid of gamers' and publishers' reactions, they are afraid of market rejection," Zieliński tells us. "They don't do such games, because instead of listening to themselves, they tend to 'bend' to meet the needs of the market and publishers. This is a so-called 'safe way' to reach gamers and sell games – for some devs it's good, but it wasn't good for us any more. We needed to make a decision, and it seems that it works fine for us at the moment. Some may say that our marketing success is luck, but I rather consider it as a reward for courage and believe me, it was necessary to have balls when it came to showing our game to the world."

Game-makers must set their own terms and level of comfort. For Running With Scissors it's really very simple. "At Running With Scissors we've always had



• There was something nasty and satisfying about using the VAT.S. system in Fallout 3. Seeing heads explode became the only way to win a fight for veterans of the wasteland.

one element we will not use: children" says Desi. "We make mature games for the hell of it, but we choose not to exploit children as subject matter. It's a moral choice we've made and stand by."

nterestingly, Hatred also drew a similar line, having been inspired by Postal. "We didn't even think about killable children, to be honest," reveals Zieliński. "And you know, there is no torturing here, killing people in our game is just a cold-blooded elimination of your targets, quite a military

style. Not because we're afraid to touch these subjects, rather because my vision was like that. The

Antagonist is hateful, but not sadistic."

As much as many may have disagreed with some of the rating controversy around Manhunt for example, it seems logical that interactivity does make its depictions of murder very different from the passive experience of a movie. But crucially, it can only be said to make the experience different. Not better, not worse, not more or less manipulative. Only different.

In Hatred's case, it seemed that some of the criticism was pre-emptive of criticism that would surely come, as if the game cast a negative light on the industry as a whole. It comes as no surprise that the maker of Postal was contacted by many outlets looking for a reaction. "Being Running With Scissors, we were immediately contacted

by the media and gamers when Hatred was announced," Desi confirms. "We fully support their right to make their game, Hopefully the marketplace will determine its success and it will not be crippled by political correctness. The power of social media coupled with digital distribution is a beautiful thing, and a great advance for democracy."

And the digital, indie realm is definitely where we're seeing some of the most impressive commentary and contextual experimentation with violence. From *Hatred* 

Ultimately, though, it has to come back to making a game that's fun. As we stated at the start we love these games not just for their content, but for the package of gameplay, themes, story, art and everything else. That's what attracted Devolver to Hotline Miami in the first place too, not the graphical content or how marketable that could prove. "We got the demo through from Cactus [game creator Jonatan Söderström] and sat down and started playing it because it was incredibly addictive," Struthers reveals to us. "I

absolutely couldn't stop, I'm not very good at it, so I played it a lot. So, it's after the event,

### "IT'S YOUR MONEY, YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU

### LIKE IF YOU'RE AN INDIVIDUAL AUTHOR"

and Hotline Miami's more overt gore and gunplay to the subtler pixelated duels of Nidhogg or the cartoonish destruction of Besiege, there's a lot of boundary-pushing and clever interplay of story and gameplay going on. The debate rages on and developers keep feeding the flames in creative ways thanks to the rise of indie development.

"I think the outcome is that the industry is becoming more of a creative medium with the indie space," is Kingsley's assessment. "Indies can make a game about whatever statement they want to make. If you want to talk about nihilism or ultra violence in society? It's your money, you can do whatever you like if you're an individual author, it's obviously your right to do that!" almost, in that particular case when you look at the game differently because at the time you're having so much fun and I think the consistent thing for us in looking for any game we get involved in that there's a key hook to the gameplay that just keeps you wanting to come back to do it."

And for all that *Hatred* has found itself at the centre of some furor over its content, making something engaging, fun and different is all Destructive Creations is interested in too. When we asked what we can expect from the final release Zieliński told us simply; "A lot of fun from destruction of almost any element of each level, tactical combat and an unusual, dark atmosphere of gameplay. But most of all – an evil grin on player's faces!"





# A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Tracking the moments where games 'went too far'









#### 1976 DEATH RACE

It may have only been 8-bit, and rewarded you for running over gremlins, but the squeals they made as they were hit didn't endear this game to some and it was pulled off many shelves.

#### 1988 SPLATTERHOUSE

Splatterhouse became notorious as one of the first games ever to feature a warning label because of its graphic content, even after edits were made. The full version didn't get a release

#### 1993 MORTAL KOMBAT AND NIGHT TRAP

When congressional hearings began into the content of games it was not only the fatalities and blood of *Morta. Kombat* that were under the spotlight, but also Sega's interactive horror experience.











#### 2003 MANHUNT AND POSTAL 2

With rewards for the brutality of your kills, Manhunt was a stealth actioner seemingly born to create controversy Postal 2 leaves the amount or violence up to you, but since its dark humour was lost or some it stirred up a backlash



#### **2001** GTA III

Once GTA moved to 3D, scrutiny became more intense with the game regularly brought up in cases of young people involved in criminal acts. Lawsuits were taken out against Rockstar and continued with many of the sequels that followed.



### 1997 GTA AND CARMAGEDDON

It was a bad year for pedestrians as both DMA Design's first instalment in the crime series and Stainless Games vehicular combat game gained some unkind glares from those who took offence at the violent driving.



#### **2009** COD: MW2

All of the attention around this game centred on a single, early level: No Russian. As an undercover officer you assist in a terrorist attack at an airport. You can choose not to shoot the civilians, but you can if you want. A strong example of a violent scene that split gamer oninion.

#### **2011** BULLETSTORM

After being picked up by
Fox News, the game's Kill
Shot mechanic came under
scrutiny for rewarding
extravagant kills and in
particular shooting enemies
in the genitals. Dark and
deliberately overblown, it sits
well within the tradition of

#### **2014 HATRED**

Yet to be released and already stirring up fevered opinior pieces, *Hatred's* unapologetic player-controlled antagonist sets out to mass murder the innocent. It's dark and challenging, but will it feel justified? We'll make our judgement once we've played the whole thing



FRIENDLY FIRE... ISN'T

# Spec Ops: The Line

#### DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360 OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC ORIGIN: Germany PUBLISHER: 2K DEVELOPER: Yager PRICE: £39.99 RELEASE: 29 June 2012 PLAYERS: 1-8 ONLINE REVIEWED: NO





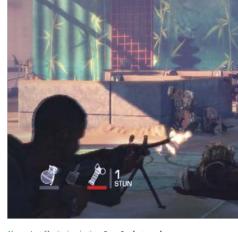
Five seconds into Spec Ops: The Line, and you're already thinking about ejecting it from the disc tray and tossing it into the pile of games with interesting premises that you bought but will never play, like Timeshift or Dark Sector. Opening with a playable how-to manual on creating the wrong impression, Spec Ops' first act is to subject players to a phenomenally boring on-rails helicopter section, and *then* the gall to have Nolan North and his dull, ubiquitous voice play the lead character. As first impressions go, it's a bit of

It's also, thankfully, by and large out of step with the rest of the game. Give it time - and you'll want to, thanks to a gorgeous, ruined Dubai setting and the accompanying postapocalyptic theme - and Spec Ops matures into something quite different. It's not often that third-person shooters (or first-person, for that matter) ask their players anything other than to press fire and not stop until Uncle Sam

wins the day, but Spec Ops also asks some interesting questions. It even approaches 'thoughtful', of all things, amongst the killing and swearing and headshotting.

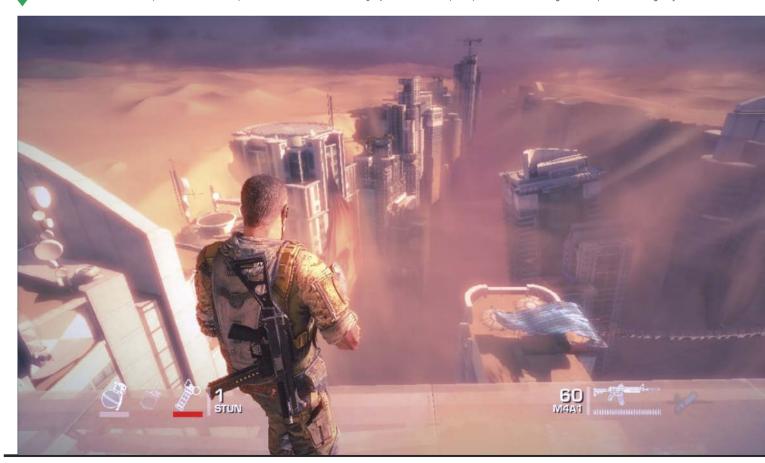
• That opening out of the way, players take control of Nolan North's Walker and his two subordinates, Lugo and Adams. Walker is a Captain in the US Army, and along with your two charges you've got to size up the situation in sandstorm-ruined Dubai. Before long you're investigating rumours that a legendary US Colonel is holed up in the city, running his own rogue mission. John Konrad (subtle, Yager) is a decorated veteran with ties to Walker's past. At the outset of the game he's not yet to be terminated with extreme prejudice, but it isn't long before you're on a collision course with the Colonel like a fat kid falling off the wagon.

It's this conflict, along with the constant stream of Bruckheimer-style apocalyptica that has befallen Dubai (leading to some stunning, stark imagery) that elevates Spec Ops from a



Above: Just like its inspiration. Spec Ops features famous music to score some of its set-pieces. The choices are good, with the classic rock and Motown hits being particular highlights. We just wish the music didn't loop if you take too long to clear the area.

Below: Events become stranger as the mission progresses, with Walker's mental state fluctuating. His body too takes a battering: his face in particular becoming badly burned.



#### FAOs

Q. SHEESH. THAT TITLE, EH? Yeah, it's not great. 'The Line' stands as a metaphor for the point where being a soldier meets inhumanity, or something.

### O. AND THE GAME?

Surprisingly complex, for its type. It certainly asks a few more difficult questions than your verage cover shooter

Q. IT'S NOT ALL SHOOTY-BANG-BANG?

Below: The grim tone of the game finds its apex in a white phosphorous attack on a supposedly hostile encampment. You can see you reflection in the remote monitor as you order the strike, a harsh reminder of responsibility when you see the horrific. cinder-singed aftermath.



#### SOUAD UP

→ One seemingly glaring omission from the Spec Ops package is co-operative campaign multiplayer. Play through the single-player for any amount of time, however, and it becomes clear that there's no way it could work, thanks to the heavy story emphasis. Regardless, two-player co-op is coming, with 2K promising "four fast-paced missions, each with its own unique objectives, environments and playable characters" as DLC in the near future. On the competitive side, Spec Ops boasts everything you'd expect in the post-Call Of Duty world. The MP features rankings, upgrades and special abilities for each side to use, as well as Yager's own take on objective-based game modes. Well, that's what the press release says, anyway: we couldn't get it to work on our pre-release code.



### at its heart it's still a shooter, but at least it's ALSO ONE WITH THE BRAINS TO ASK YOU TO SHOOT **SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

so-so shooter into an intriguing experience. At its core, there's nothing to celebrate, over and above a solid shooting system and satisfying mechanics. Spec Ops doesn't try and reinvent anything, and we're absolutely fine with that: it has its eyes on other prizes.

With this solid - and let's face it, Gears Of War-inspired - base the game is free to focus on its true hook, which is storytelling in both the visual and narrative senses. As with the gameplay, it has a clear and identifiable inspiration and doesn't try to hide it. Again, Yager chose well: Heart Of Darkness (well, more Apocalypse Now). Where most shooters simply pit players against aliens or communists (and there's no difference really) Spec Ops turns American friendlies against each other as Walker's recon force finds itself at odds with Konrad's praetorian quard, with

both sides going slightly more insane as the hours tick by.

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NGERPR

■ It enables Yager to SUN, SAND, SADNESS: The Arab metropolis makes for a nice change of scenery, and the choice of plot its set-pieces less combatants is a similar departure from the expected around rousing action bad guys. Just don't expect a (direct) sequel. sequences and more

the disheartening realities of war. Walker, Adams and Lugo start off as a bunch of merry men, bantering their way through the mission, but before long they - in an allegory for the American forces at war with each other - soon come to bitter disagreements regarding the direction of their task. Walker believes that Konrad has gone crazy, is actively harming the remaining citizens of Dubai by ordering them to stay put. Konrad believes that escape is impossible. And as for the CIA agents inserted into the mix by a nervous US government, it's safe to say they're not to be trusted.

As the team proceed further 'upriver', to Konrad's command post in Dubai's tallest building, things disintegrate further: rules of engagement are questioned, civilians are killed, moral choices are made, and the narrator becomes increasingly unreliable. It's a welcome change from the gung-ho grunting of the norm, and although some tonal mismatches are present (brutally executing so-called friendlies is starkly 'gamey' next to the narrative) it's enough to lure players in and keep them interested

As are the environments this all plays out against. The cover-and-fire, two-guns-andgrenades system may be familiar, but Dubai is a great locale, filled with exotic technology, architecture and largesse all mixed up in the wash by the sandstorms that wrecked the city.

Visually, it's one of the best backdrops we've seen for a long, long time, the surreal environment matching that of the story; seeing

> gigantic yachts beached in the middle of nowhere is striking, and that's just one example of many that Yager implement very well indeed, keeping the battleground fresh. It's not the most polished

game out there: the cover system is sometimes janky, checkpointing can be a little aggravating at times, any time you're in a vehicle you'll want to kill yourself more than Konrad, and the ending could be considered one trope over the line. But these are irritations, and pale when considered against the whole.

There was a time when we thought that Spec Ops: The Line wasn't going to make it out of development hell, or that it would simply drift off into the land of vapourware, to spend its time hanging out with Final Fantasy Versus XIII and the like. We're very glad it didn't, and that 2K gave Yager the time and money it needed to finish the project.

It's not particularly new or innovative in its core mechanics, but it marries the dependable and familiar with the not-so to create one of the year's most interesting titles. At its heart (of darkness) it's still a shooter, but at least it's also one with the brains to ask you to shoot something different.

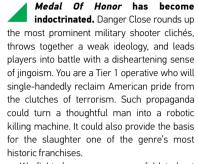
A CUT-AND-PASTE ABOVE THE AVERAGE

#### THE MORALITY OF BORE

# Medal Of Honor: Warfighter

#### DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3 OTHER FORMATS: PC. Xbox 360 ORIGIN: US PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Danger Close PRICE: £39.99 RELEASE: 26 October 2012 PLAYERS: 1-20 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Warfighter's name says an awful lot about the developer's ambition. The game could have been called Gunslinger, Bulletshooter, or even Doorbreacher. Rest assured, you will breach a lot of doors. First impressions are vital. Ambition for the game dropped as soon as the subtitle was announced. We've somehow gone from stunning re-creations of Saving Private Ryan to throwaway snippets depicting the War on Terror. In its second outing as a modern shooter, this former leader buffs up, loses its personality, and makes DICE's Frostbite 2 engine feel like a bumbling war veteran.

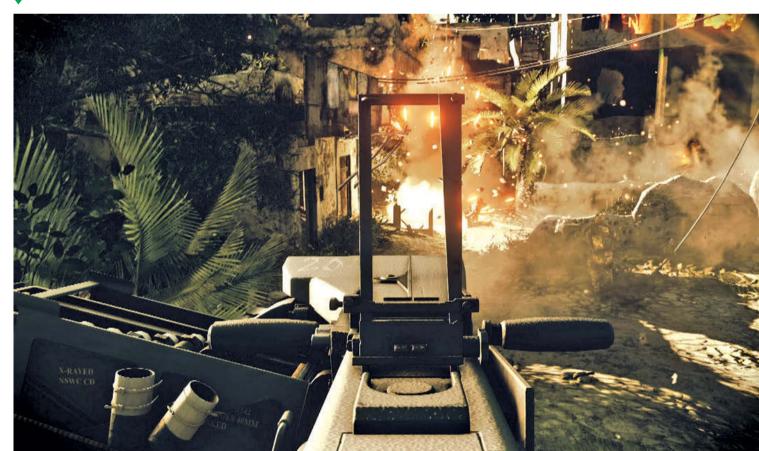
■ Back to those door breaches. Every assault must challenge your ability to get through wood. Whether you kick, crowbar or tomahawk your way through, get used to entering rooms in dramatic slow motion. Behind every door lies yet another room or corridor. Each linear route seems to have had an effect on the sanity of the game's Al, with many sprinting towards cover, only to change their mind at the last second. You can sit back and splatter the enemy's skull as he flits between two identical barricades.

Others feel so attached to their fallen comrades that they must endure a similar death. When one body falls, another often staggers into view. Trampling the dead obviously isn't frowned upon outside the States, as your foes make a human barricade out of their deceased brothers. You'll quickly understand where the opposition is going to



Above: Your pals will provide the customary hand to pull you up when things get tough. These actions are even edgier with a beard.

Below: Frostbite 2 makes for some stunning screenshots. It's a shame the action isn't quite so pretty when in motion





#### FA0s

### Q. SHOULD I BRING A PASSPORT? Expect to visit Pakistan,

Somalia and the Philippines during the campaign. Not that any of them look different.

### O. WHO DO I PLAY AS?

Preacher returns from the previous game. You'll also spend time as the lovingly

#### Q. CAN I PLAY WITH FRIFNIS?

Co-op isn't included. A multiplayer buddy system helps link you with your pals.

Below: We fully recommend you turn the brightness right up. Warfighter's darkest sections will have you firing blind.



#### HONEY. I'M GOING TO BE LATE

■ Warfighter tries to represent the morality of war through cut-scenes. Expect wives who threaten to leave, emotionless daughters, and a dinner meeting interrupted by a vital mission. Each domestic flashback is so cheesy that it loses any profound effect, not helped by wooden characters that are never developed beyond 'man' and 'wife'. Dialogue is similarly clichéd, pieced together from the trimmings of terrible films and often appearing humorous rather than emotional. If you want to experience the terrors of war, play Spec Ops: The Line.



### WHETHER YOU KICK, CROWBAR OR TOMAHAWK YOUR WAY THROUGH, GET USED TO ENTERING ROOMS IN DRAMATIC SLOW MOTION

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GUNS, GUNS: Some interesting weapons

would really spice things up. The continuous thud

of standard machine gun A or B for hour after hour drains life from the soul.

hide, making Warfighter's gun battles rather bland from the outset.

It doesn't help that the game's campaign is stuffed with a generic filling. The majority of the single-player is spent firing various types of machine gun and initiating peek-aboo tactics from cover. Sniper sections break up the monotony, with one scene forcing you to consider bullet trajectory over a great distance. Unfortunately, your shots will always hit if you aim slightly higher than the target's head. This is one example of mechanics never being explained. The developer knows you've experienced similar levels before and doesn't intend on engaging players with new ideas.

Away from predictable firefights and door breaches, Warfighter rarely tries to do things differently. The most interesting side notes come in the form of driving interludes, where you take control of a speeding car in chase or escape scenes; ploughing around corners and

into oncoming traffic is exhilarating, albeit shortlived. Things are mixed up in the latter stages, in which vou'll be forced to outwit enemies by hiding in the shadows. It's tense and well implemented.

Imagine Pac-Man in the world of Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit and you'll see the potential.

This promise never develops into a significant amount of enjoyment. You'll take the helicopter rides, man the powerful guns, and use remote-controlled cars to your advantage, but then originality is dismissed the moment you realise the enemy's answer to everything is a rocket-propelled grenade. That's how the modern FPS works, right?

The lack of ideas could be accepted if Warfighter ran smoothly. Instead, plenty of bizarre bugs make leniency difficult. Your sight will flicker on and off when hidden behind cover, almost as if objects keep poking you straight in the retina. Guns float in the air, jagged edges halt your progress, and your squadmates increase the chance of death through stupidity, such as their ability to push you from cover with their knees. You won't notice when looking down the sight of your gun, and are only likely to spot what's happened when you start getting riddled with bullets.

■ The same comrades sometimes decide they can't be bothered to fight, and will sit behind the battle with little more than a confused grimace on their face. Expect them to fire inaccurately throughout. Even as part of a squad, you're a lone wolf. A one-man tide-changer who employs human sponges for cover.

A measly campaign doesn't warrant a return once the five hours are up. Multiplayer modes offer the token TDM and CTF variants. but there's nothing here to get excited about if

> you've spent the last year playing Battlefield 3. It's fair to say online play is adequate, but the game's lack of personality and competition ensures this won't hold your attention for long.

Danger Close has provided nothing more than a stopgap until Battlefield 4; as if a military shooter was needed this year, so anything would do. Such an approach could prove damaging in the long run. Frostbite 2 appears creaky at best and broken at worst, its ability to create stunning set pieces remaining undoubted but the technical side not guite adding up. This game is riddled with irritating tics and inconsistencies.

Warfighter is the type of game that would enjoy eating rum and raisin ice cream, wearing brown shoes and listening to Coldplay. It dons a Justin Bieber side sweep in an attempt to fit in, while underneath its delicate mop resides a shaven-headed man's man who has nothing new or intelligent to say. This title may look the part, but there's a lack of activity between the ears - an inescapable blandness that cripples everything the game has to say. The overwhelming patriotism, sense of chauvinistic values and incompetent AI round off one of the year's most disappointing releases.



#### **DEAD RISING**

→ The third point of Treyarch's gun-heavy triangle is the everpopular Zombies. It remains an amusing side mode, this time beefed up to feature a bus that can transport players between three maps, and plenty more areas to discover and unlock. As always, it's vital to play with friends and with communications on, as co-ordinated task management is the only real way to survive. Sadly, the three-map Tranzit mode doesn't have the wit or charm of some of the original Black Ops' inspired celeb-driven Zombies missions, but with a year's worth of DLC in the pipeline, it's likely they'll appear soon enough. Fun, then, but still a poor man's Left 4 Dead.





IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PICK 'EM: The new Pick 10 create-a-class system is a much-needed refresh for multiplayer, and adds

layers of choice and depth. Time will have to tell on

whether really overpowered combos are possible.



TREYARCH BRINGS OUT THE BIG GUNS AND MAKES THE WORLD'S RICHEST GAME ITS OWN

# Call Of Duty: Black Ops II

#### DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360 OTHER FORMATS: PC. PS3. Wii U UBIGIN: IIC PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Treyarch PRICE: £44.99 RELEASE: 13 November PLAYERS: 1-16 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

in the world. The pressure to succeed is immense, and there's a gang of naysayers champing at the bit to celebrate your fall from grace should you dare slip below the level expected by the community. Even harder, surely, for a studio that's been established as the B-team, a secondary developer originally charged with plugging the yearly gaps in between Infinity

It's not easy being the biggest game

Ward's main events. Treyarch must be feeling that pressure, then, but if it is, it's doing a great iob of not showing it. Black Ops II is not only a confident, accomplished

and surprisingly progressive entry in this most fatted of cash cows, but also the moment where Treyarch takes control of Call Of Duty for itself.

The package is split into three distinct sections, as demonstrated by the no-nonsense back of the box and the equally matter-of-fact menu. Anyone who thinks the campaign is the core of the game in 2012, though, only needs to check the subscriber

counts on YouTubers like Syndicate and Ali-A. Call Of Duty is, quite frankly, a multiplayer phenom. And so that's where we'll start.

With Black Ops, Treyarch proved itself as a master of map design, creating arenas suited to both deathmatch and objective games, filled with nuance, memorable choke points and secret passages. Black Ops II is no different, featuring another first-class selection of

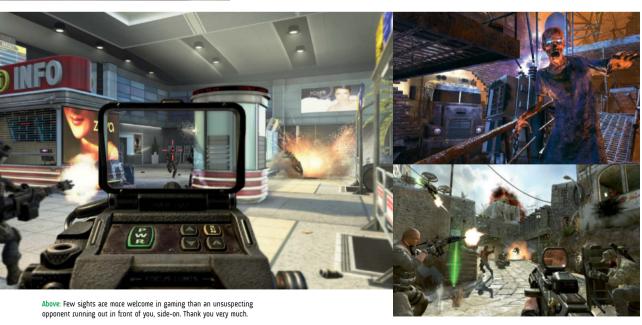
killzones managing accommodate almost every mode without compromise, and minimising the opportunities camping and griefing.

Instantly, that familiar

COD flow comes flooding back. Whether you're diving on capture points in Domination, creeping around in the shadows in Search and Destroy, or just sprinting through a Team Deathmatch, racking up kills, it's as compelling and moreish as ever. It's easy to write off COD's achievement as an online game. It lacks the spectacle and drama of Battlefield, or the multidimensional weaponry and unscripted excitement of Halo, yet its popularity and

Left: It may lack the drama of *Battlefield* or the raw skill of Halo, but COD's multiplayer is still the most enthralling and

addictive out there





Left: Many of the streaks are drone-based, thanks to the 2025 setting. Hunter Killer drones are like lethal paper aeroplanes. while the Swarm streak will unleash a ton of the buggers onto the enemy

constant presence at the top of the Live charts prevails over both.

Why? It's like comfort food. McDonald's fries, or a tube of Pringles. There might be more nutritious stuff out there, but that doesn't matter when vou're in COD's fast food haze. The relentless flow of XP, unlocks, treats and challenges; the never-ending customisation options; the maps, the modes, the knife kills. Thud, thud, thud. Is there a better noise? Not when it's accompanied by 100XP and another victim of your itchy trigger finger. And it just keeps on rolling.

It would have been easy for Treyarch to play it safe and dole out another Infinity Wardapeing feature set, but David Vonderhaar and his multiplayer team decided to set about improving everything that makes COD sacred. Now, to some that might mean a complete overhaul, but Call Of Duty's style is almost as established as a sport. So, when Treyarch makes changes, it does so in the back end. The old create-a-class system has been thrown out and redesigned, now falling under its new moniker. Pick 10.

■ Instead of a rigid framework for weapons, perks and attachments, Black Ops II allows you to select ten loadout options. So you might drop a perk in order to carry an extra attachment, or ditch secondary grenades to load up on perks. This bold design choice fills the multiplayer with possibility, and you can easily level all the way up to Prestige without truly settling on a loadout - a far cry from the original Black Ops' 'AK-74u and you're done'.

Treyarch is keen to push hard into the eSports world too, offering the ability to sign up for league play where you're matched into a division based on a trial period. All items are unlocked, and you can livestream your games on CODcast, an impressive new bandwidth-hungry broadcasting mode. What will hurt its attempts to push Dota 2 and StarCraft from the top of the eSports ladder, though, is latency compensation. Currently, it's all too common to get killed by single shots, only to watch the killcam replay and see your opponent casually stroll up to you and pop three or four shots into your chest. It's infuriating, and a problem that Treyarch desperately needs to address.

Also, during these early days, it does appear to favour SMG players. Vonderhaar has promised to kill any myths about weapon balance with statistics, but those who favour a more cautious approach look to be at a disadvantage. It's not uncommon for an online game to suffer teething problems, so let's hope Treyarch keeps on top of them.

Beyond the gladiatorial arena of multiplayer, Black Ops II of course features

#### FA0s

#### Q. BEST LOADOUT?

Still early days, but com of the MP7 with three attachments are looking tasty

O. WORTH PLAYING THE CAMPAIGN?

Q. BEST VOICE ACTOR? It's got to be everyone's favourite pseudo-hobo, Michael Rooker.

Right: The COD engine is certainly looking past its sell-by date, but is still capable of conjuring up some beautifully lit environments. More importantly, though, it remains locked at 60fps. which is crucial for the feel of the multiplayer.



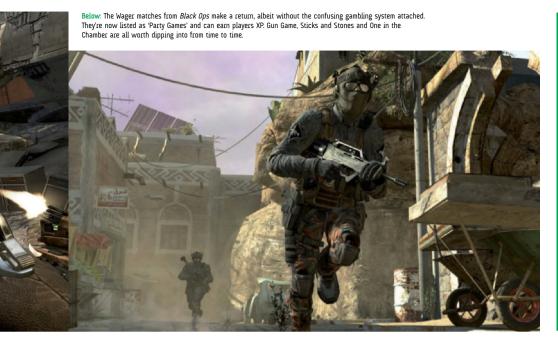


a flashy campaign that continues the story of Woods and Mason from the first game, as well as a future varn starring Mason's son, and the Michael Rooker-voiced Harper. Although it's hard to shake the feeling that much of the setpiece-heavy gameplay is built to service TV ads rather than hardcore FPS players, there's still been a commendable amount of effort and thought put into the action

While much of the campaign is linear, Treyarch has included branching storylines with Walking Dead-style choices, multiple endings, and all-new Strike Force missions

Above: The Tranzit bus gets you to the three different Zombies maps, and can be overrun by the undead. It's a novel twist





### TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

### THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



O Campaign started, many men shot, and an alarming number of people burned alive. It's the same old thing, but as competent as always.

2 HOUR



○ Time for a dip into multiplayer to see what's going on. 30 matches later, and you're still in there, hoovering up XP and fostering that precious K/D ratio.

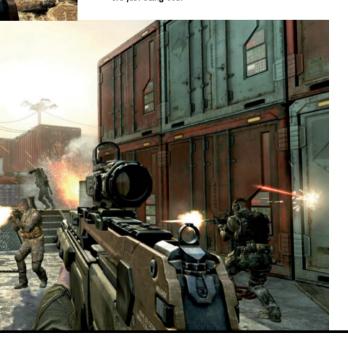
3 DAYS



Campaign finished, nicely levelled up in multiplayer, and a few sessions on Zombies out of the way. It's that familiar November feeling, and Treyarch has delivered it with panache

#### COD WARS

old As well as branching story elements, the campaign features a new Strike Force mode, which attempts to rope RTS elements into the COD framework, with mixed results. Enemies attack a fairly open map, and you can use an overhead camera to select and direct troops to defend. Unfortunately, the friendly Al is all but useless, so you'll have to hotswap into specific soldiers and vehicles in order to have any success. It's commendable that Treyarch has tried to switch up the increasingly stale COD formula, but the fact that three quarters of the Strike Force missions are optional is a fairly damning indictment of their quality. A brave try, but COD is better when it's just being COD.



(see boxout) that do disrupt the typical *Call Of Duty* rhythm. As you flit between the Eighties and 2025, Treyarch does good work in establishing a sense of place and time, littering every mission with memorable set pieces. The horse-riding and wingsuit are two highlights.

• You're now given the option to customise your loadout at the beginning of each mission too, including gun selection and perks. It's a decision that benefits the variety of the gameplay but damages the relative validity

of the narrative, as you feel like a videogame character rather than a 'warfighter', to use the parlance of our times.

It's a confident and thoroughly enjoyable campaign, skilfully

written and assuredly conceived. It could never offer the kind of depth and combat variety of a *Halo* or *Far Cry*, but Treyarch has expanded the boundaries of what is possible in single-player *Call Of Duty*. And in Raul Menendez, the franchise has its sexiest baddie by far – a kind of digital brother-in-law to *Skyfall*'s Javier Bardem. Although quite what happens in the post-credit sequence is for the psychiatrists to dissect. Utter madness.

Zombies does an admirable if limited job of rounding out another chunky *COD* package, this time pushing towards an openworld structure, but ultimately continuing the

esoteric co-op survival theme that has won it a legion of fans over two previous games. In truth, anyone who's played *Left 4 Dead* will find Zombies a little facile, especially as *Black Ops II* doesn't feature a celebrity cast list. Expect a host of DLC to improve and flesh out the mode, and a raft of YouTube vids to reveal all of its secrets.

Really, though, it is all about that competitive multiplayer. Treyarch will hope that *Black Ops II* makes a genuine splash on the professional scene this year, especially after bringing in pro-gaming celeb Hastr0 to

consult on the CODcast system. For the rest of us, it's still a compelling and unusually addictive carnival of carnage, with an RPG level of customisable depth and a dangerously enthralling

flow of XP, medals and rewards.

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MULTI PLAYER: Multi-team mode makes its COD

debut, and is just as manic as it is elsewhere LAG DRAG: The lag compensation can be a

nightmare for gun-on-gun battles.

Treyarch has approached *Black Ops II* with a swagger, almost. The changes it has made to multiplayer are the most interesting since *Call Of Duty 4* revolutionised online warfare, the way it has approached the campaign is laudable, and the *Black Ops* name is now as significant, or even more so, than *Modern Warfare*. Treyarch has made its sunny Santa Monican base a true city of *COD*. What can Infinity Ward do next year?

VERDICT 8/10
BACK IN BLACK, AND FEELING GOOD ABOUT ITSELF

## Saints Row IV

It's fairly easy to sell a Saints Row game to the masses. Should you wish it's possible to play the latest from Volition as a transvestite Silver Surfer clad in nothing but a pair of posh suit pants, a bikini top, donning a ginger afro, and speaking with the voice of Nolan North (as himself). Did we mention that you're also the President of the United States of America and have access to superpowers? Suffice to say, that short description will be enough to help you make your decision and – flaws be damned – you'll have a ruddy good time with it if we've won you over. Enjoy.

But then this has always been Saints Row's remit: the opportunity to express your innermost desires through unusual attire, violent assaults on the innocent and the desire to – for want of a better term for it – doss about. By now you'll likely have played a Saints Row game, or at least seen enough of the series to know whether it's worth your time.

And, by now, you'll likely know what to expect from Saints Row IV; the setting may change, but the gameplay has not. That likely sounds like a criticism – and in some ways it is – but for the

most part Saints Row has managed to craft a neat little niche for itself, just outside of the shadow of GTA so as to freely 'do its own thing'. If you can't have fun in this world then, frankly, the fault is with you and not the game.

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

**TICKLE ME PINK:** Saints Row IV is considerably more confident in itself and especially in its humour.

Relying a little less on the debase than Saints Row:

The Third's shock tactics, it's more rounded.

■ A large part of this is Volition's ability to make increasingly outlandish missions, starting out with a bang as your chosen human abomination scales an in-flight nuclear missile to the tune of Aerosmith's I Don't Want To Miss A Thing. If there's one thing Saints Row IV should be credited for, it's the ability to provide ample amounts of laughter, however incredulous it may be. But then there's the personal entertainment that Saints Row enables, too. Outside of its outlandish story missions there's a whole world of items to collect, mini-games to complete and – if that's your calling – rampages to unleash on an unwitting city. It is a game that is comfortable with you simply existing within it, and offers up a number of new things to do within those boundaries.

Primary among these 'new things' is the inclusion of superpowers, ranging from the simple ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound and run-of-the-mill super sprint to telekinesis and the ability to control the elements. Each of them are built into their own form of mini-games too, so there's no threat of having few reasons to put them to use. It's here that Saints Row IV treads a very awkward line; historically the franchise has erred more on the crew-focused crime game, but with the inclusion of superpowers it becomes a whole new beast. It becomes more Crackdown than GTA and that could be enough to cause concern among the loval fan base that Saints Row has built up. There's no denying that the superpowers can be used in a number of entertaining ways, but it's also a considerable change for the franchise. Once you've gained access to superpowers it's highly unlikely you'll ever use a car again besides using them as ad-hoc grenades with your telekinesis, of course. As a result this cuts

out any desire to travel with more traditional means, or to collect your favourites and customise them with an array of garish colours of tacky attachments. Sure, the option is there, but it never

feels like a part of the game – as though doing so would be a wasted effort.

■ The selection of new tools and weapons are even more elaborate than ever too, starting out at the simple Bounce Rifle - which, in the game's own lingo, fires bullets that bounce from target to target like a pinball racking up a billion points - or the equally ridiculous Dubstep Gun. As you might expect from such a weapon, the sounds it creates will be familiar to anyone who has watched a videogame trailer in the last couple of years, but its effect is far more amusing. Initially causing its victims to break out in robotic dance, the weapon can be upgraded to destroy its opponents in a blaze of soundwaves and ear-piercing wubs. More than that, however, the option to customise your weapons provides another level of player choice, whether it's as simple as changing its skin (a rocket launcher dressed like a guitar, for example) or even picking one of many 'types' of weapons, altering the way it fires and how you might best use it.



Above: These big guys appear periodically throughout the game and are a means to add to your roster of superhuman abilities. They do get tiring.







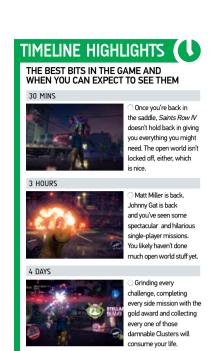
Above: This thing - while being a 'hilarious' *Harry Potter* gag - also acts as a means to stop the alien swarm from constantly attacking you. A welcome addition to anyone who played *Saints Row: The Third.* 





### BETTER CRACK DOWN ON THOSE ORBS

↔ If the ability to hop-jump your way up a building wasn't enough, *Saints* Row IV's Crackdown resemblance doesn't stop there. The world is littered with 'Clusters', small glowing blue orbs that - once collected - can be used to enhance one of your superpowers. The difference here is that, unlike Crackdown - which improves each skill gradually as you use it - these Clusters act as a form of currency to unlock upgrades for your favourite power. It's a good use of a tried-andtested mechanic, but that's less about the quality of implementing these collectables and more to do with their abundance and the innate gamer desire to collect shiny things in videogames.





Below: The same missions you saw in Saints Row: The Third return here, but with more sci-fi twists. This spaceship isn't any different to the attack helicopters of the last game. Except the *Tron* theme, obviously.



KILL THE

Above: It's hard not to be amused by the concept of the dubstep gun. It's just a shame that the weapon itself needs to be upgraded quite a bit before it's of any use. But when you do, it's fantastic.

#### MECH-ING IT EASIER FOR YOU

→ The future of the *Red Faction* franchise is up in the air at the moment, but that doesn't mean Volition can't retain some of the elements that made their most recent outings fun. Sadly that doesn't mean the ability to level every building in Steelport with GeoMod technology, but it does mean mechs - or Power Armour Suits - have returned. Last spotted in Red Faction: Armageddon, it only makes sense that these destructive machines should be given a place to demonstrate the thrill of being encased in metal and smashing everything to pieces. Saints Row is a perfect fit for this kind of gameplay, so we're glad to see them implemented.





FAQs

#### Q. JOHNNY GAT?

Normally we'd consider this a spoiler, but Volition already revealed it anyway – yes, Johnny Gat is back.

#### Q. GUNS?

Despite the superpowers, gun combat still remains a large part of the game, thankfully.

#### Q. CO-OP?

Yep. Two players can team-up to play through the game. Earning gold on some mini-games practically demand it, even.

These are just more strings to the bow of Saints Row IV, though, and by now there's a seemingly unending supply of options thrown your way. To its credit you're never stuck for things to do, especially now with the inclusion of optional side missions that collate a select choice of open world side missions into a string that reward you with an unlockable upgrade, whether that's increased firepower, a new weapon or simply an improvement to one of your existing abilities. It's a subtle twist - one that requires stepping out of the simulated version of Steelport that your hero finds themself trapped in - to interact with an increasing bevy of supporting characters. Again, it's a subtle change, but a positive one. It provides direction for those unable to find it, pushing you to experience the multitude of options available at any one time and rewarding you for doing so. Though the disparity between the side missions and the main ones aren't always properly realised - some characters may reference others who have yet to be returned to the main hub - it's an ignorable flaw that is an otherwise commendable inclusion.

And speaking of the hub, it's here that Saints Row IV really proves it has the teeth to take on all comers. We saw glimpses of such brilliance with Saints Row: The Third, but it isn't until this latest iteration that Volition really goes to town on its ability to parody. The opening section, for example, is a po-faced jibe at Call Of Duty's incessantly scripted stealth sections, culminating in the aforementioned hyper-emotional last ditch effort to save the world from a nuclear war. The hub, however, is a less-than-subtle dig at Mass Effect. Even the game's story resembles

a pastiche of BioWare's magnum opus as you piece together recognisable faces of the *Saints* in a bid to complete your spaceship's crew after they had been kidnapped by a malevolent – and extremely British – alien emperor. You could call them, perhaps, a 'suicide squad'. With the option to explore the hub and interact with your increasing number of crew-mates it'd be impossible to not get the *Mass Effect* vibe here. There's even

MISSING

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GOING DOWNTOWN: There needed to be a hit more

new' to validate a full sequel, and hiding Steelport

beneath the shadow of an alien invasion doesn't do enough to hide the fact that this is the same location.

an option to complete 'Loyalty' missions. If that wasn't enough, though, the option to 'romance' your allies – which really is the equivalent of a 'press Y to sex' button – proves its

nature as a parody, its tongue always firmly pressed against its cheek. It's an element that Volition should explore in greater deal in the future, and we hope it does: there are few franchises as able to be so fast and loose with its gameplay mechanics as *Saints Row*, turning it into the perfect platform as an allencompassing videogame parody.

For all its glimmers of brilliance, however, Saints Row IV fails to sell itself as a fullyfledged numbered sequel. Returning to Steelport – even in its glum, semi-apocalyptic state - is still returning to a world we've already seen, we've already scoured. At times it can feel as though this latest Saints Row is more of the same, and while that's undoubtedly fantastic for many, it's as equally a deterrent for those unwilling to pay full price for what could've - perhaps, should've - been DLC. Part of the problem are the mini-games, some of which remain unchanged from their very first appearance in the original Saints Row. Then there's the subtle twist on game modes we've seen in the Saints Row: The Third. Take, for example, the Blazing races you'll encounter here; the same in almost

every way as the Trial Blazing events of the last game but utilising the new Super Sprint ability instead. It's little more than a minute change that does nothing to wipe away that sense of déjà vu. No one expects a revolution with every sequel, but the combination of reused assets and a limited selection of actual new side content turns Saints Row IV into something of a repeated grind.

Volition stands on something of precipice

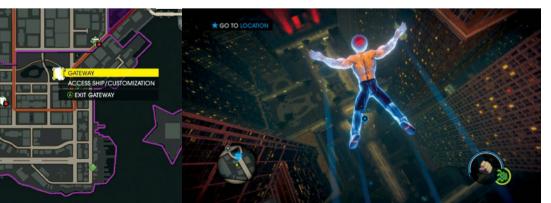
with the series now. It knows what it can get away with and its humour is something that really does shine through with Saints Row IV, but it runs the risk of losing track of

what made the game so popular in the first place. Consider Tony Hawks, a series once regarded as pure but - as its popularity soared - diluted the elements for which it was praised for in lieu of unnecessary features and a focus on the over-the-top and the bizarre. Now with the Saints Row franchise's popularity at an all-time high, an unexpected inclusion of superpowers risks running the series into a similar identity crisis, and sadly there isn't enough new to Saints Row IV to pitch these new features in a convincing manner. Saints Row needs to be bold to succeed and, as it stands, it feels as though it's running on a well empty of ideas. Had this latest come along as a heavy-featured DLC expansion pack or even a standalone spinoff akin to Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare – then it would have been a little more persuasive Saints Row IV needed to do quite a bit more to be worthy of the number four.

But it's hard to overlook what Volition's latest does do well, and ignoring its ability to make us laugh - a sadly increasing rarity these days - would be a disservice to the best parts of the game. With a touch of the deprave and a emphasis on out-of-this-world spectacle there's enough going on with the main set of missions through the majority of Saints Row IV that you'll never find yourself bored, so it's just a shame that the open world segment - the area that had previously been the series' key playground - has been somewhat ignored in favour of neon-lit setpieces. So as it stands it's not a series in decline, not yet, but Volition needs to plan its next steps carefully, or run the risk of losing the fan base it has worked so hard to claw away from those that didn't quite click with GTA IV.



### SAINTS ROW IV NEEDED TO DO QUITE A BIT MORE TO BE WORTHY OF THE NUMBER FOUR





#### **FLYING HIGH**

⊪ It's still the best part of playing GTA - and also the most complicated in its mechanics. Like all of the character skills, flying becomes easier if you do it more and more, and by the game's climax, you will be trying to hover under every single bridge in the game, much as you could in Liberty City. The difference is, with a city this size, it will take much longer than five minutes to comb the entire map, and when the engine splutters and dies as you try to cross a mountain range, there's a certain amount of drama in bringing the aircraft to a stop. No doubt intentionally, your first flight takes place during dusk over one of the quieter landscapes in the game, a brisk change of pace from the heist mission that precedes it. While it all may be open from the start, these deliberate touches frame the world in an interesting fashion





# FOR: VIOLENCE AND CRUELTY

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

**RANDOM PEOPLE:** Most of the strangers come attached to boring missions that could've been

stricken from the game in many cases, instead replaced with just a well-written cutscene.

AMERICAN HUSTLE

## Grand Theft Auto V

Grand Theft Auto V is, as expected, a

best-of compilation of everything that

Rockstar has achieved to date in open world

game design. With the dynamic nature of Red

Dead Redemption. Max Pavne 3s sharp combat.

the feeling of scale from San Andreas and the

relentless detail of Grand Theft Auto IVs Liberty

City, it's a generous package wrapped around the

its three interchangeable main characters, Michael,

Franklin and Trevor, all of whom are a little lighter

The biggest sea change for GTA V is of course

most impressive of sandbox environments.

#### **DETAILS**

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Scotland
PUBLISHER: Rockstar
Games
DEVELOPER: Rockstar
North
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 17 September
2013
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

to be in the company of than *GTA IV*s frequently tortured Niko Bellic. While Michael is the most interesting of the group, essentially a retired Tommy Vercetti in witness protection who even dwells relentlessly on the Eighties while struggling to bond with his family, Franklin is a sympathetic-if-bland wannabe master criminal who realises he has to make his opportunities in life. Trevor, on the other hand, is an all-consuming loose cannon, representing that space of *GTA* characters that simply fly off the handle and perform appalling acts for chuckles.

The best thing about the story is that it doesn't take itself nearly as seriously as *GTA IV* – that approach certainly had a place and marked an interesting tonal departure for the Rockstar of five years ago, yet this lighter storyline puts it much more in the ballpark of *Vice City*; some pathos, but otherwise played for comedy. Controlling the three

of them, on the other hand, is a new experience, and at any moment the player finds themselves wandering around the open world with nothing to do, they can jump into the shoes of the others to see what they're up to in about ten seconds or under, depending how far away they are.

Some course-correction has been done with

regards to the pacing – no longer do we have to wait for different parts of the world to open up, it's entirely open from the start, with the slightly later introduction of Trevor also providing quick access to

aircraft. To balance that out, it always feels like it takes slightly longer to get anywhere in the context of the storyline when you're playing as three characters at once, and while one of the intentions of having three characters may have been to minimise downtime, there are still plenty of quiet moments in which to absorb the open world.

To make that high concept even sweeter, driving, shooting and flying mechanics have all received a significant overhaul. The cover-based shooting feels like it uses Max Payne 3 as its foundation, while driving is more responsive and less rigid than it was in GTA IV, meaning that it's not quite as easy to fall foul during a chase as it used to be. Flying is still a bit unwieldy at first, even playing as Trevor, but easy enough to learn – and

naturally, getting airborne across these immense landscapes is still a breathtaking highlight as it always has been in *GTA*.

**...** It's gratifying, then, with these basic revamps in mind, that the backdrop to any titting about in *Grand Theft Auto V* just happens to be the most

creatively and technically accomplished open world ever created. Los Santos – but it really is just a next-gen San Andreas, minus San Fierro and Las Venturos – absolutely offers the sense of place

that the final *GTA* on PS2 accomplished but against a far grander backdrop, that feeling that the surrounding world changes as Michael or Franklin move outside of the city, going from urban decay to beautiful countryside, all realised with the kind of remarkable detail that we haven't seen anywhere else during this generation.

Los Santos itself is to Los Angeles what Liberty City is to New York, a truncated replica that perfectly captures the spirit of what that American city represents. In this case, it's vanity, showbiz and perverse wealth existing alongside overwhelming poverty. Los Santos captures the decaying glory of the city with gusto, to the point where we found ourselves driving under a bridge we had to walk under to get to

Left: Los Angeles really isn't as nice a city in real life as New York, hence Los Santos isn't as initially striking. But the beauty comes in details; a boring chunk of LA is cut out, connecting Downtown to Santa Monica.



Above: Franklin's storyline takes you into parts of Los Santos that will feel familiar if you played even a little bit of San Andreas. We won't give it away...





Left: NPCs actually swim for their life when you raid boats at sea. As you would, we suppose. E3 earlier this year, or walking past the hotel where we interviewed Peter Molyneux (under construction).

Everything is where it's supposed to be, in a condensed but eerily accurate way – even if your perception of Los Angeles is formed from movies and TV, you'll see something you recognise, like the beautiful LAPD building from LA Confidential (and indeed, *LA Noire*), or the famous Hollywood theatre where Jon Favreau got blown up in Iron Man 3. It's as much informed by popular culture as it is reality, such is Rockstar's approach to building cities in *GTA*, and a kind of nauseous celebrity culture manifests itself very well in the story, radio stations and even just NPC dialogue.

Then, on the other side of the world in dry mountainous landscapes that wouldn't look out of place in Fallout, another environment entirely transforms the GTA experience. The world is gigantic, and while Los Santos is certainly the most densely detailed part of it, the remote landscapes where you initially pick the game up with Trevor is the other crucial half of GTA Vs world. Driving from the sticks to the Los Santos is an immensely pleasurable journey that rivals John Marston's sojourn into Mexico, and no matter how many times you make that trip, no matter how you get there or at what time of day you're travelling, it's quite unlike anything else. This world has everything a seasoned GTA fan will be looking for after the more reserved scale of GTA IV - and existing consoles are able to handle it just fine. minus the occasional pop up.

Having three characters occupying this immense world isn't as a big a difference overall as we thought it might be. It's more meaningful in missions, where you can perform multiple roles at once, sometimes at the behest of the game, and other times at your own discretion. Indeed, missions involving multiple characters are usually the best, and the heists, which require a certain amount of preparation and allow players the freedom to plan how things will go down, are among the highlights of a very strong set of story

levels that harbour greater ambition than we've seen in the series to date.

More notable, actually, is the way missions take advantage of the sandbox – stealth and action-based approaches are both on the cards in a lot of scenarios,

and the missions of this nature are impressively open-ended in the way the player can kill their way to the finish line. The kind of scenarios we had to wait until the final third for in previous *GTA* instalments, those involving aircraft, insane firearms and continuous chaos, are prevalent throughout *Grand Theft Auto V*.

Yet at the risk of peaking early, *Grand Theft Auto V* changes pace often and finds compelling

#### **FAQs**

### Q. IS THE SCRIPTED STORY CREDIBLE?

It's extremely entertaining, though not a masterpiece in

#### Q. IS IT CONTROVERSIAL? It is. We had to do more than a couple of things we weren't

Q. BETTER THAN RED
DEAD?
Bigger. But it's a tie for sheer
wonder at the world provided

Right: Police encounters are a little softer than they were in GTA, thanks to a health bar that recharges up to half and cops that are

easier to evade.



ways to draw us into the different parts of the world. The result of this structure is a heightened sense of place, three protagonists offering different snapshots of life in Los Santos through their interactions with other characters. It doesn't feel particularly new, but the character switching has a novelty than never really wears off, while the progression system attached to skills gives adequate incentive to play as all three.

•• For us, it was Michael we gravitated towards the most and spent the majority of time with, his interactions with his ungrateful family being an early highlight. Indeed, if we wanted to pinpoint the greatness of GTA Vs systems and the dynamic stories that it permits, an example is when we returned home to Michael's plush home one day and looked in every room for his family

members: his witless and overconfident gamer son Jimmy, his wayward daughter Tracey and his mistreated wife Amanda. Every interaction with each of them usually yields some funny moments, but since

none of them were home, we instead got high on Jimmy's bong, staggered back into Michael's bedroom and had him try on every suit in his wardrobe before giving up and passing out on the bed. It's a small instance that reminded us that we both care about the characters and had the agency to express ourselves within the world, and whether on a micro or macro level, *GTA V* allowed us to do almost anything we'd want to.



RW1602B0

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

**GTA ONLINE:** GTA's online component hasn't been taken into account with this review because it simply wasn't available – next month we'll be taking an in-depth look at *GTA*'s MMO-inspired online content.



### TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS (1)

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

35 MINS



Reassuring: it's a lot easier to drive a car than it was in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The city impresses on a number of levels straight away, with fast cars easy to access from the very start of the game.

12 HOURS



We've found our way out of the city and the sun sets as we collide a car with a nearby group of pedestrians and drive off to Britney Spears' Gimme More. The contrast is somehow pleasing.

07 DAYS



O Unsurprisingly, there are still loads of things to do and big patches of the land still to be explored. You'll also begin combing the ocean floor just for fun. The magnitude of this world is unbelievable.

#### THE TIME IN BETWEEN

off The story will naturally show you what the world has to offer in a fairly organic fashion. However, when we reflect on our personal GTA V experiences, we instead think of the moments where we decided to do a circle of the entire map from early evening to late morning the next day. While the story offers necessary structure, don't be afraid to just follow your whims and see where it takes you – the training wheels are always off in Los Santos, which is the best decision Rockstar could've made in allowing players to uncover the open world if they're too impatient to follow the story. That seems to be the new trend for sandbox titles these days – maybe today's audience isn't into the idea of deferred gratification in game design.



# EVEN IF YOUR PERCEPTION OF LOS ANGELES IS FORMED FROM MOVIES AND TV, YOU'LL SEE SOMETHING YOU RECOGNISE

The smaller details and activities of the world are best left as surprises to be found - stranger missions return in an increased capacity, some of which are quite rote in mission design by GTA V's overall standards, but nonetheless embellish the world through its different viewpoints. The radio stations clearly telegraph the post-recession context of the setting - which perhaps feels a couple of years out of date in channelling the direct outrage of ordinary people towards the banking top brass that ruined millions of lives - and it's helped by Rockstar's funniest scriptwriting since GTA III's Chatterbox. Some of this content can be hit and miss, but there's something subtly pleasing about Lazlow and a couple of his radio collaborators being among the few surviving elements of 2001 GTA to present day. Hardcore fans who remember Lazlow being educated in martial arts combined with eating vegetables are bound to appreciate these touches.



Radio stations have a remarkable level of variety, although enjoyment of them is bound to depend on your musical tastes, even if, say, your music involves vaguely embarrassing late Nineties/Noughties pop. Amazingly, some stations are regional, too – drive over the hills out of Los Santos and you'll lose the signal of one and pick up another. Television returns in an even more elaborate, lightly satirical fashion. *GTA V* is so giving, and with so many ancillary activities available outside of the main story, you will quite seriously invest *Skyrim* levels of time in it.

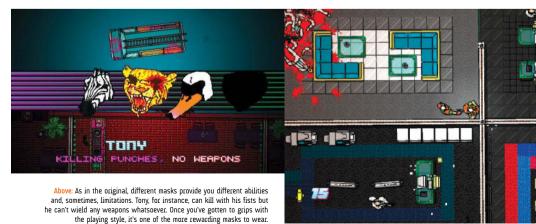
Dan Houser compared the making of Rockstar's epic to the troubled production of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and in some ways the same result has been met: a product that represents the peak of the blockbuster triple-A form, that realises grand ambition without visible compromise. It's likely you're reading this review having already bought *GTA V* or with the intention to do so – indeed, its release is a deserved cultural event, and while this sequel may not be remembered for showing us anything strictly new, this represents the pinnacle of Rockstar's design ingenuity across every single discipline, a game that absolutely everyone will feel richer for playing.

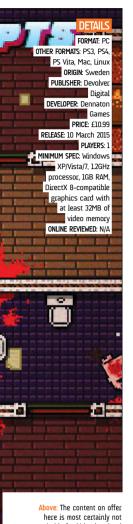
VERDICT 10/10

MASTERFUL OPEN WORLD DESIGN FROM THE PIONEERS
OF THE GENRE



#### YOUR OWN PERSONAL SLAUGHTER









INTO A HEART OF DARKNESS

# Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

The difficult second album problem applies not only to music. In the realm of videogames, plenty of revered games and creators have been undermined by an inability to provide a sequel that is anywhere near the quality of the original. But from the challenging content to the arresting visuals, from the achingly cool music to the ferocious difficulty, everything that made Hotline Miami great is served up once again here.

Don't think the similarities undermine the experience, though. A range of initially subtle changes to the formula eventually reveal themselves as impactful and welcome alterations and additions. Most immediate is the greater diversity. Where the first game saw you ransack a number of buildings that featured uniformly similar shades of pink floors, white walls and brown doors, here you're quickly moved between interior and exterior locations, gang hideouts and film sets, forests and night clubs. It's a glorious diversification of a focused visual style and one that elegantly destroys the naysayers claiming 'pixel art' has killed itself through cliché and saturation.

•• The broader range of colour schemes and layouts is mirrored in the varying scale of levels, with the long-winded and exhausting transitioning

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

RUNNING TIME: It's bigger than the original, requiring

es to the characters have been diversified.

**GREATER VARIETY:** Everything from the visuals to

you to spend more hours reaching its conclusion.

into the short and sharp, and back again. Pleasingly, this prevents the campaign feeling like a chore. Just as fatigue over the impenetrability is beginning to set in you're given a decidedly easier task to

overcome, allowing you to regain your composure before being thrown back to the sharks.

Understandably buoyed by the plaudits it has received, Dennaton has branched out into more complex mission design to fill these expansive spaces. A new type of difficulty is thrown at you in the form of strict loadout limits, with certain missions asking you to select a weapon and forcing you to stick with it until completion. This flies in the face of one of *Hotline Miami*'s core building blocks: the ability to pick up and throw away any weapon you come across.

These weapon-limiting missions stick out in the mind as expertly balanced examples. The very fact that designer Jonatan Soderstrom knows which weapon you're holding allows him to better craft a



Above: Narrative moments such as this, in which a movie star is being interviewed for TV in front of a live audience, are carriers for the themes and messages that *Hotline Miami 2* is so skilled at communicating.

level that tests very specific skills, something that, in hindsight, the original lacked once you'd reached a certain degree of competence. Brutally, there are missions that refuse you the right to use firearms at all and yet take great pleasure in throwing what can seem like an endless stream of enemies your way. Remaining open to experimentation is key to progression given this consistent changing of the rules. The player doomed to failure is the one that stubbornly sticks to methods that have seen

success in the past, with certain levels here going so far as to switch which character you're in control of partway through... sometimes multiple times.

just how much a slight change in your available actions change the experience. This stands as testament to how well honed Hotline Miami's underlying principles really are, with every slight deviation resulting in a clear and obvious modification and effect. The emphasis on using different characters and being forced to master different abilities makes sense when viewed through the narrative. Set primarily after the events of Hotline Miami 1, the story encapsulates the personal lives of many more characters. Before the finale you're given access to the eyes of a troubled actor, a soldier, a detective, a journalist and more.

Themes centre around political and social unrest, with emphasis on the effect that horror, gore and violence as depicted in the media has

IMPILI 3540M

BETTER THAN

BETT

#### FA0s

### O. DO I NEED TO PLAY THE ORIGINAL?

The narrative continues on from the first game, so a level of familiarity certainly helps.

#### Q. IS THERE ANY FORM OF

MULTIPLAYER?

No, as with the original this is a strictly single-player only game.

### O. MORE HOTLINE AFTER THIS?

Dennaton has previously stated that this will be the final game in the series.

had, and might continue to have, on civilisation as a whole. The journalist embodies this idea with particular elegance, his seemingly neutral facade able to be corrupted by the player should you so desire. By presenting this content via the different viewpoints and experiences held by the cast, Dennaton has managed to both expand its narrative horizons and lay waste to the idea that its particular brand of controversial bloodshed is nothing more than gratuitous self-publicity. There will, of course, be those that venomously object to the content here (it's already banned in Australia), but a deeper reading of the subject matter reveals a message that stands in protest to certain elements of our present reality. It's a message written in the language of that which it stands in opposition against. What better way to get your point across?

Everything here, from the narrative to the gameplay, is completely devoid of hand-holding and patronisation. What can be learned and understood takes time to uncover and master, a tack that sets *Hotline Miami 2* apart from modern mainstream game design and its obsessing over players never feeling 'stuck' or 'frustrated'. It takes effort to receive your rewards here and, as a result, success is all the more satisfying. It is, therefore, worth playing through everything included multiple times to fully appreciate the goals that Dennaton has aimed for and the results it has achieved. This is not merely a sequel worth playing, it's one worth consuming again and again until its every secret has been revealed.

